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ISSUE

MAY/JUNE 2025

# ANIMATION MAGAZINE



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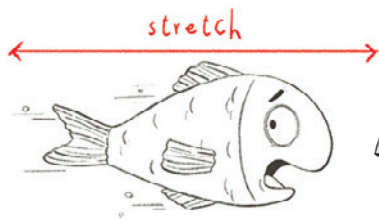
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# ANIMATION MAGAZINE



MAY/JUNE 2025

VOLUME 39, ISSUE 5, NUMBER 350



Elio



Phineas and Ferb



Emerald

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**Editorial Cover A:** Pixar's *Elio* blasts off into theaters on June 20.

**Editorial Cover B:** Disney TV Animation delivers a new season of *Phineas and Ferb* on June 5.

**Anecy Festival Cover:** For the first time ever, Walt Disney Animation Studios, Pixar, Marvel Animation, Lucasfilm, Disney TV Animation and 20th Television Animation will come together at Anecy!

Disney celebrate milestones and upcoming projects (including *Elio*, *Dragon Striker*, *Zootopia 2*, *The Simpson* and *Eyes of Wakanda*) at the Anecy Festival.

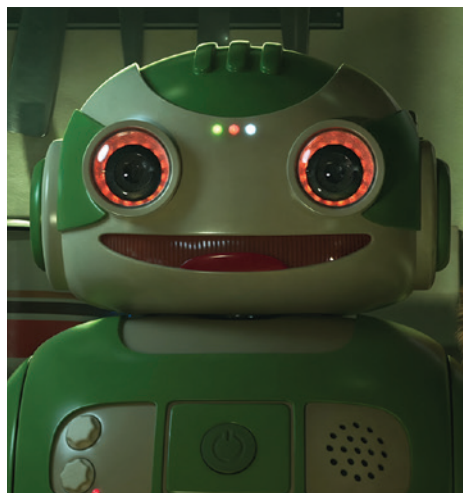




# ANIMATION MAGAZINE

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VOLUME 39, ISSUE 5, NUMBER 350



Love, Death + Robots



Mecha Builders (Guru Studio)



Snow Bear

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visuals remain immaculate.  
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Jennifer Yuh Nelson’s  
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Den of Geek

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of what animation and genre  
storytelling have to offer.”

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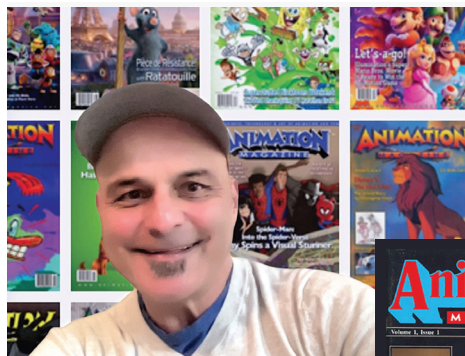


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# 350 Issues and Counting!



As we were preparing this special issue of *Animation Magazine* this month, I was reminded of a quote from the late great comedian Don Rickles. When he was asked about the secret to his longevity, he replied, "There's no secret. You just have to stick around!" Well, I am personally very grateful that this publication, which was first launched by Terry Thoren in August of 1987, has been able to weather the ups and downs of the industry and publish its 350th issue this month. Thanks to the efforts of our president and publisher Jean Thoren and the amazing teams throughout the past 38 years, we're proud to have chronicled the work of so many of the brilliant people who make up our animation world.

Our big double issue this month is also timed with the 2025 edition of the Annecy International Animation Film Festival. With bold, artistic movies such as *A Magnificent Life*, *Death Does Not Exist*, *Dandelion's Odyssey*, *Arco* and *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain* in the features competition line up, there is no doubt that there is no shortage of auteur-driven animated titles on the horizon for the rest of the year and beyond. We have several stories about some of the highlights of the event in this issue – a rich array of film, TV and shorts screenings and inspiring panels – and we promise to continue highlighting

these international projects in upcoming months.

The summer movie season has also arrived. That's why we have several feature stories about what the big studios have cooked up for audiences that are hungry for fresh family fare. Pixar's intergalactic experience *Elio* arrives in theaters on June 20, and we're glad to bring you all the behind-the-scenes nuggets and insights in a special cover story, penned by longtime contributor Karen Idelson. We also have great features on some of the month's other hot features – Netflix and Sony Pictures Animation's *KPop Demon Hunters*, Han Ji-won's sci-fi romance *Lost in Starlight*, Michel Gondry's *Maya*, *Give Me a Title* and Reza Memari's *The Last Whale Singer*.

There's a lot more in store for you in this special milestone issue.

Jean will be attending Annecy, so please stop by and say hello to her at our booth. Please know that we wouldn't be able to put the magazine together without all your kind words, support and feedback through the years.

On behalf of all of the fantastic *Animag* staff – **Damaso & Lucy Abrajan, Jan Bayouth, Kim Derevlany, Francis Klaess, Mercedes Milligan, Sam Selvaggio, Sheri Shelton and Jean Thoren**, I thank you and hope you enjoy this special collector's issue. Call us crazy and delusional but, here's to 350 more issues – which by my calculations should take us through the year 2060! (By which point, my uploaded consciousness will be ready to *really* celebrate from the Cloud.)

Ramin Zahed  
Editor in Chief  
[ramin@animationmagazine.net](mailto:ramin@animationmagazine.net)

## QUOTE OF THE MONTH



"I think AI is a great tool for people who know how to use it to say something about the human experience. So, I think it will be a game changer, but it's still most effective and most powerful in the hands of artists and storytellers ... it takes something and sands the edges down, so it makes the blob average ... But if you really want to do something brand new and really insightful and speak from a personal angle, that's not going to come from AI fully. It only ever create what's been fed into it. It doesn't create anything new, it creates a weird amalgam of stuff that's been poured into it."

**Pixar CCO Pete Docter** in *The Hollywood Reporter*

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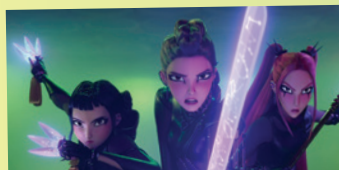




# Animation Planner: May/June 2025



Book of Joshua: Walls of Jericho



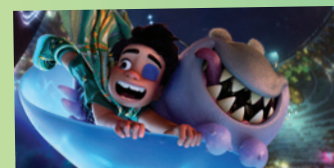
KPop Demon Hunters



How to Train Your Dragon



Walking with Dinosaurs



Elio



Wylde Pak!



Phineas and Ferb



Predator: Killer of Killers



Smurfs

## JUNE

3

A new animated Biblical epic hits VOD with **Book of Joshua: Walls of Jericho** from PartingSeas Productions and BMG Global.

5

Disney TV's iconic duo **Phineas and Ferb** return with a super-fun summer takeover after a decade-long hiatus!

6

Prepare for a new, fully-animated story from an iconic sci-fi/horror universe in **Predator: Killer of Killers**, launching on Hulu today. Meanwhile, a new multicultural blended family moves in on Nickelodeon's **Wylde Pak!**

8

Bid *bienvenue* to the epicenter of animated artistry this month at the **Annecy International Animation Film Festival** and **MIFA** market, packed with screenings, stellar guests and can't-miss events throughout the charming French Alps town. [annecyfestival.com](http://annecyfestival.com)

13

Dean DeBlois presents a new vision of Cressida Cowell's fantasy world in the live-action reimagining of DreamWorks' **How to Train Your Dragon**, in theaters and IMAX today.

16

25 years after roaring to screens for the first time, BBC Factual & PBS have teamed up for a new **Walking with Dinosaurs** series, bringing prehistory to life with the latest animation tech.

20

An out-of-this-world friendship hits screens in Disney-Pixar's **Elio**, an original story directed by Madeline Sharafian, Domee Shi & Adrian Molina.

On streaming, music and monster hunting collide in Netflix's **KPop Demon Hunters** from directors Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans and Sony Pictures Animation.

## JULY

2

"Survival is a long shot" in the creature FX-heavy standalone sequel **Jurassic World: Rebirth** from Universal.

9

**South Park** makes its long-awaited Season 27 premiere after a two-year hiatus from Comedy Central.

11

James Gunn's take on the Man of Steel (and Krypto, too!) hits theaters in WB's **Superman**.

18

Peyo's blue dudes return to the big screen in Paramount Animation's **Smurfs**, starring pop star Rihanna as Smurfette!

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

### Cartoons on the Bay

Pescara, Italy

[cartoonsbay.rai.it](http://cartoonsbay.rai.it)

### Animafest Zagreb

Zagreb, Croatia

[animafest.hr](http://animafest.hr)

### TIAF

Tbilisi, Georgia

[filmfreeway.com/tbilisiananimationfestival](http://filmfreeway.com/tbilisiananimationfestival)

### Fest Anča

Žilina, Slovakia

[festanca.sk](http://festanca.sk)

### Palm Springs ShortFest

Palm Springs, CA

[psfilmfest.org](http://psfilmfest.org)

### Palm Springs Int'l Animation Festival

Palm Springs, CA

[psiaf.org](http://psiaf.org)

### Anibar

Peja, Kosovo

[anibar.org](http://anibar.org)

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TO A SHOW THIS HEARTWARMING,  
FUNNY, AND REWARDING.”



**BIG MOUTH**

COMING AGAIN.  
FOR THE LAST TIME.





# The Must-Have List

By Mercedes Milligan

## BOOKS



### The Art of Elio

Explore the uncharted territory of Pixar's latest original animated adventure, which follows a young alien-obsessed boy across the galaxy. This lush, collectible hardcover features character designs, storyboards, color scripts and other original artworks from the film's development and production, plus exclusive behind-the-scenes details from the creative time. A preface from Pixar chief Pete Docter, foreword by director Adrian Molina and introduction by directors Madeline Sharafian and Domee Shi open this out-of-this-world creative probe in hardcover!

Chronicle Books / \$45



### The Art of Invincible Season Two

Unmask the creative secrets to Robert Kirkman & Cory Walker's critically acclaimed Prime Video hit in this suped-up hardcover. Featuring a foreword by Kirkman and original illustrations by Walker, the tome is packed with exclusive character, background and vehicle design reveals, as well as key art and more.

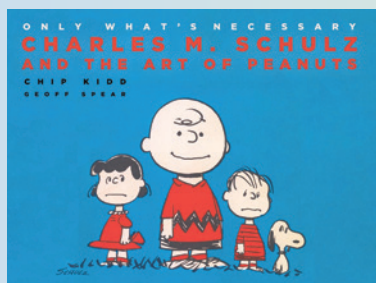
Image Comics / \$40 / July 8



### The Real Ghostbusters: A Visual History

Pop culture connoisseurs and *Ghostbusters* gurus Troy Benjamin and Craig Goldberg have crafted a collector's dream in this guide to the beloved Saturday morning cartoon, based on the hit 1986 movie. This book blends rare and never-before-seen images and artwork, script excerpts and internal memos, prototypes and abandoned concepts along with new, exclusive interviews for a scarily thorough overview of the franchise.

Dark Horse Books / \$55 / July 8



### Only What's Necessary: Charles M. Schulz and the Art of Peanuts

Celebrate the 75th anniversary of the globally adored comic with a collection of "the best" strips reproduced from the original art by photographer Geoff Spear, as well as exclusive, unpublished original art and development sketches never before seen. Author Chip Kidd, who has written and designed more than a dozen books on influential comics, was given unprecedented access to the Charles M. Schulz Museum in order to craft this loving hardcover ode to Charlie Brown, Snoopy and all our favorite friends in ink.

Abrams - Anniversary Edition / \$30

## MERCH

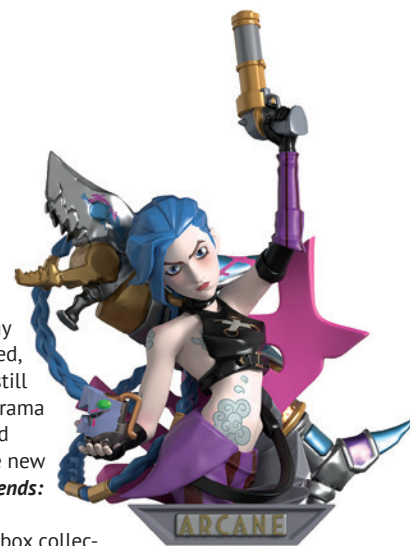
### Legendary Loot!

The series may have concluded, but fans can still tap into the drama of Piltover and Zaun with the new

### League of Legends: Arcane Series

Figures blind box collection from POP MART. Featured characters include Jinx, Ekko, Heimerdinger, Vi, Caitlyn, Jayce, Viktor, Warwick and Mel, plus two secret editions: Powder and Jinx (Special Version) – with a 1/72 chance of drawing.

PopMart.com / \$31 per box, \$279 complete set



## DISCS



### The Day the Earth Blew Up: A Looney Tunes Movie

Porky Pig and Daffy Duck return to their iconic form in Pete Brownard's hand-drawn alien invasion!

Ketchup Ent. / \$27



### The Colors Within

From Naoko Yamada (*A Silent Voice*) comes an emotional story of friendship, synesthesia & rock 'n' roll. Special features include the short film *Garden of Remembrance*, live talk & drawing and crate digging & photowalk sessions with Yamada, scene breakdowns and more.

Shout!, GKIDS / \$27



### Masters of the Universe: Revelation/Revolution SteelBook

Battle through the war for Eternia in this smashing double dose of the Netflix animated series, created by Kevin Smith.

Mill Creek Ent. / \$50



### Nobody's Boy Remi

Take home the first (and only) 3-D anime series, directed by Osamu Dezaki and adapted from Hector Malot's heartbreaking novel of childhood tragedy.

MediaOCD / \$70



# HOWLY & WOOLY



- New IP, bible available
- Q4 2026, digital-first rollout

# CUQUIN



- 9.4B YouTube views in 2024
- Season 2 for Max in production
- New toy deal lands in Brazil

# Tippi T-ReX



- Major deal secured in China
- New episodes in co-production with Mocca





# FRIENDLY ABDUCTION

**THE CREATIVE TEAM FROM PIXAR'S *ELIO* OFFERS A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT THE MAKING OF THE STUDIO'S INTERPLANETARY 29TH FEATURE.**

By Karen Idelson

Some of the highest-grossing films of all time speculate on the existence of aliens and center on abductions. There are also those rarer films that take a more curious than fearful view of extraterrestrials, wondering if we might be able to connect with them somehow. Pixar's new summer movie *Elio* follows the latter tradition.

Like so many of us here on Earth, the movie's central character feels alone and out of place much of the time. So he sets out to encourage any aliens who might be around to abduct him in the hopes of finding somewhere he belongs.

The film brings together some of the studio's finest young talents. *Elio* is directed by Domee Shi (*Turning Red*), Madeline Sharafian (an Academy Award nominee for the animated short *Burrow*) and Adrian Molina (*Coco*). These three creators also have story credits on the movie. Acclaimed veteran production designer

Harley Jessup worked on the film as well. Jude Brownbill (*The Incredibles 2*, *Turning Red*) and Travis Hathaway (*Inside Out*) were animation supervisors on the project.



## Alien Resurrection

As the filmmakers shaped *Elio*'s quest to be abducted, they looked to inspiration from classic films that featured alien life-forms such as Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Ridley Scott's *Alien*.

"The story was originally conceived by Adrian Molina, one of the directors of the

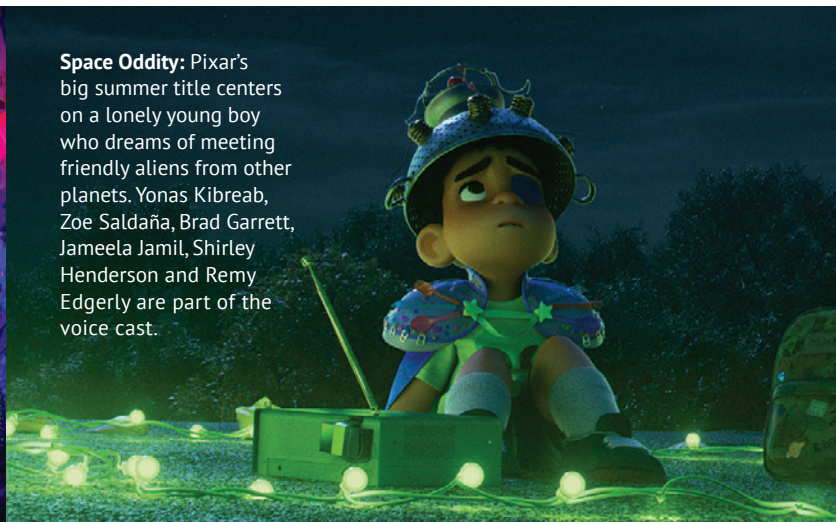
movie," says Shi. "He pretty much based *Elio* a lot on himself. You know, his mother worked for the military. He always felt like an odd kid on the military base. But, then, when he had to step away to co-direct *Coco 2*, he entrusted the movie to [Sharafian], and then eventually to me as well, and our inspiration, when we approached *Elio*, was tapping into our own childhoods of feeling lonely and wanting connection and wanting to feel belonging somewhere in the universe."

Shi explains that, in the beginning, *Elio* is obsessed with getting abducted by aliens and with going into space. "I think that is how a lot of us have felt at that age," she notes. "Even when we're older now, just like really wanting and dreaming of finding a place where you belong, where you don't feel alone. That's the inspiration that we were drawing from ourselves and putting into *Elio*."

"Also, the fact that he's just a big space nerd is very relatable for me," adds Shi. "I'm not a space nerd, but I'm a huge animation nerd, anime nerd. I remember when I first went



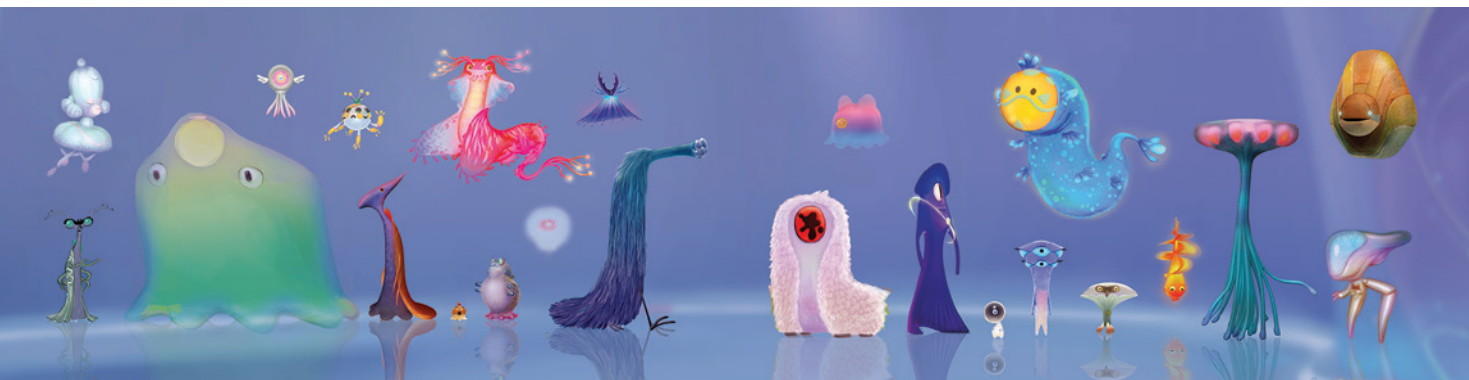
**Space Oddity:** Pixar's big summer title centers on a lonely young boy who dreams of meeting friendly aliens from other planets. Yonas Kibreab, Zoe Saldaña, Brad Garrett, Jameela Jamil, Shirley Henderson and Remy Edgerly are part of the voice cast.











to my first anime convention in high school, I felt the way Elio feels in the movie when he's abducted and he meets the aliens. I felt like I was finally in the right place, I'm with my people. So that's kind of the emotion that we were drawing on."

### True Colors

As the story came together, these inspirations helped form the color scheme for the movie. The filmmakers wanted to convey

out. They turned it up to 11."

As the directors came to the animation supervisors with ideas for how to depict the aliens, it became clear there was some heavy lifting to do. They were creating the rules not only for an alien environment but for how the aliens themselves would look. Often, it came down to just trying many different things until one pass worked and the character emerged.

"I think the Ooooo (Elio's alien friend)

According to the film's VFX supervisor Claudia Chung-Sani, to bring Oooooo (the liquid supercomputer) to animated life, the Pixar team took decades-old technology called metaballs and engineered it into a new innovative process. "Oooooo is Pixar's first topology-free character rig," she explains. "She is an arrangement of implicit shapes (i.e., she exists only in math equations) that blend together to give Pixar animators unprecedented flexibility and speed to achieve Ooooo's many functions and endearing performances, while maintaining a liquid, blobby shape. To add even more complexity, Oooooo has circuitry and glow flowing through her shapes in a continuous cohesive display: This is traditionally challenging when working with implicit surfaces."

Chung-Sani continues, "Imagine playing with clay in real life. As you push and pull it into shapes, the clay automatically paints itself into a translucent sculpture complete with internal pulsing circuitry. This would be impossible in real life, but very much a reality in the Commiverse!"

For Jessup, being the production designer on *Elio* was especially meaningful because he started his career at ILM as an art director.

Calling on his experiences there dealing with outer space, aliens and fantasy films, the project became a way to find a new perspective on space. He says he tried to make the universe especially playful.

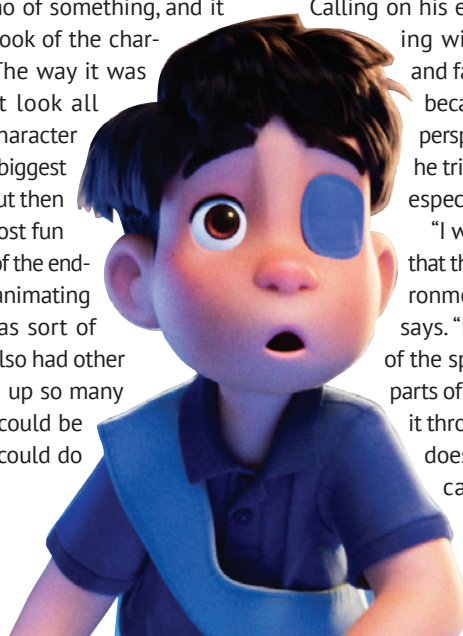
"I was focused on the idea that this kind of futuristic environment is not dystopian," he says. "It's not a scary version of the space. There are exciting parts of it, but we wanted to see it through Elio's eyes, where it does look inviting and you can see how he would



the hope and curiosity of space but also the delightfully weird aspects of it.

"We had a lot of fun picking the color script for the film," says Sharafian. "We both love really bold color choices, and we wanted the days on Earth for Elio to feel like he was the odd man out. So we gave him this really electric kind of alien, classic little green man look. That green color goes through Act One. Once he's in space, we really needed it to feel like his own personal heaven. We amped up the colors. It's super saturated. It's just this beautiful, kaleidoscopic place, because it has to feel to him, and to the audience, that this is a place that he should never leave, and maybe he possibly can get to stay there forever. The colors are gorgeous. I think our production designer, Harley Jessup, and our lighting DP, Jordan Rempel, really went all

character probably was the one that scared us the most," says Brownbill. "And then one day, you know, one of the animators came to us with this demo of something, and it was like, wow, the look of the character was solved. The way it was presented made it look all too easy, too. That character had been one of the biggest problems to solve, but then it was almost the most fun to animate. Because of the endless possibilities of animating a character that was sort of liquid in a way but also had other elements, it opened up so many ideas about how it could be done and what we could do to make it special."







Concept art for Elio's alien friend, Glordon. (All images courtesy of Disney/Pixar)

actually want to stay there, which was an important story point. And contrasting that then with the more neutral, severe color palette on Earth at the Air Force base, we wanted to really work those two contrasts between a hard edge of materials. So you see this kind of concrete, asphalt environment of the Air Force base, contrasting to the translucent fluid around its shapes of what Elio sees in space.

"At one point, Pete Docter said we should



DOMEE SHI

MADELINE SHARAFIAN

**"The hope is that *Elio* will inspire kids and adults to be more curious about space, about what could be out there for all of us and to find their own place to belong here on Earth."**

DIRECTOR DOMEE SHI

**"We had a lot of fun picking the color script for the film. We both love really bold color choices, and we wanted the days on Earth for *Elio* to feel like he was the odd man out."**

DIRECTOR MADELINE SHARAFIAN

think of the Air Force base as a concrete parking lot," Jessup continues. "It wants to be that big of a contrast to what Elio is going to see in outer space. And he should almost feel the most alien when he is on Earth, because he clearly doesn't fit in there. So those were interesting ideas that we were playing with."

For this group of filmmakers, each with their own ideas about feeling out of place and wanting to help Elio convey his quest to belong, crafting this movie quickly took on personal meaning. They're hopeful audiences get a sense of that hopeful journey. Shi herself drew from her own path.

"We definitely hope kids who might feel alone or out of place take something from this, because that was something that I felt when I started to feel like an animation nerd," says Shi. "The hope is that *Elio* will inspire kids and adults to be more curious about space, about what could be out there for all of us and to find their own place to belong here on Earth. I think it was important for us as we made this movie just [to] have it be this message of hope, of wonder, of seeking out connection."

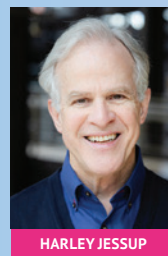
She says that idea is something Elio learns throughout his journey. "He learns that belonging isn't arriving at a place where everyone immediately gets along with you," Shi concludes. "It's actually reaching out. It's putting it upon yourself to extend your hand and help somebody in need, or if they don't understand, you try to kind of make them understand. Or if you see someone in trouble, to help them out. It's seeing your journey as a way to connect with others and find your place with others." ■

**Disney will release Pixar's *Elio* in theaters on June 20.**

## A FINAL SPACE ODYSSEY

**F**or Oscar winner Harley Jessup, wrapping up production on *Elio* also meant bringing his time at Pixar to a close. The 71-year-old production designer says he'll retire after making six films with the Bay Area studio.

"Working with Pixar has been so memorable, I've worked with many wonderful artists," says Jessup. "One thing I've learned is that I have to be careful about giving advice to other production designers, because so many times I'm learning from them, even though I'm the oldest guy in the department right now.



HARLEY JESSUP

I've learned everybody does it in a different way, they're bringing different skills to the table. I think there's the discipline that we all have in common, and I'm a firm believer in doing very thorough

research, visual research, on every aspect, every prop, every setting, every character, so that we can get the world feeling as authentic and believable as we can. And the audience, I think, picks up on it."

Jessup's work with Pixar includes *Monsters Inc.*, *Ratatouille*, *The Good Dinosaur*, and *Coco*, in addition to *Elio*. Before joining Pixar, he was a visual effects art director for the legendary ILM from 1987 to 1994. There he worked on *Innerspace*, for which he won an Oscar for best visual effects. He also worked on *Hook*, which earned him a visual effects Oscar nomination, and *The Hunt for Red October*.

"Even after doing *Elio*, my sixth feature at Pixar, every one of them you kind of start from scratch. It's a whole new world with each film. That's the challenge, but it's also the fun part of getting to research and learn about and think about a new space. I'm kind of going through withdrawal right now. I kind of do after every movie, where I feel sad to not be thinking about it anymore. So it's the same thing with *Elio*. It's been really fun thinking about the outer space environments. It was a challenge, I think, trying to think up a new version of space. And I'm going to miss that, as we kind of finish up on it." ■





From its title alone, *KPop: Demon Hunters* promises to be a completely original and unique story in an industry increasingly focused on sequels. Crafted by Sony Pictures Animation, the film follows a K-pop trio named HUNTR/X that moonlights as demon hunters, a classic superhero hidden-identity setup where the “regular” persona of the character is inflated to a stratospheric form of fame not afforded to the Peter Parkers and Clark Kents.

### Zeroing in on Demonology

The idea came from Maggie Kang, who helms the movie alongside Chris Appelhans, director of Sony’s 2021 film *Wish Dragon*. “It’s known as ‘the K-pop movie,’ but that was the last thing folded into the concept,” Kang tells *Animation Magazine*. “I wanted to just make a movie that was set in Korean culture, so I delved into mythology

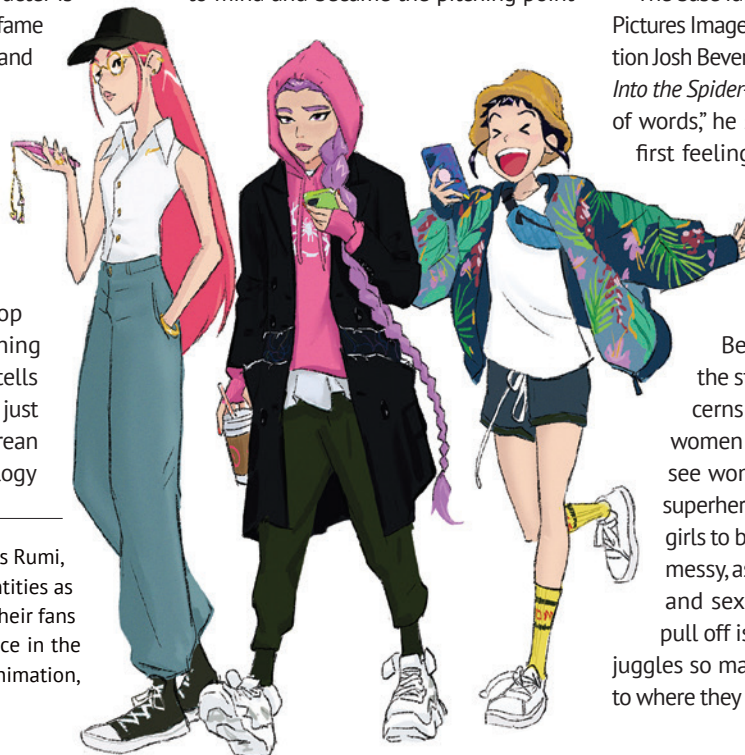
and demonology for something that could be visually unique from what we’ve seen in mainstream media. I’ve also always wanted to do a group of amazing kick-ass women. [Production designer] Helen Chen draws these amazing, beautiful female superheroes who are not overly sexualized but still very strong and feminine. I thought about a daily job that they could do, and K-pop just came to mind and became the pitching point

of the movie.”

Appelhans was next to join the project. “I had just finished directing *Wish Dragon* and was planning to take a long break,” Appelhans recalls. “But when Maggie told me her initial ideas for this project, I was like, ‘Oh, no. No break for me. We have to do this.’ Maggie has the same taste and same ambition, and that was clear from our very first conversation.”

The base idea was enough to intrigue Sony Pictures Imageworks’ head of character animation Josh Beveridge (*The Sea Beast*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*). “It’s an odd combination of words,” he says. “Intrigue is probably the first feeling I had, and as someone that views everything through the animation lens here at Sony, I saw this as an opportunity to make some really cool visuals.”

Before any visuals were defined, the story and themes were top concerns for Kang. “I wanted to portray women the way I’ve always wanted to see women portrayed, especially in a superhero movie,” she says. I wanted the girls to be funny and silly and goofy and messy, as well as cool and aspirational and sexy. Another thing I wanted to pull off is similar to how Bong Joon Ho juggles so many different tones in his films to where they feel very animated. They’re very



**Killer Talent:** K-pop group members Rumi, Mira and Zoey use their secret identities as badass demon hunters to protect their fans from an ominous supernatural force in the new feature from Sony Pictures Animation, bowing on Netflix in June.





# KOREAN POP TO THE RESCUE!

**THE DIRECTORS OF KPOP: DEMON HUNTERS  
TAKE US BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE NEW  
NETFLIX/SONY FILM. BY RYAN GAUR**

comical but they're very dark, and so we try to do that in our film."

For Beveridge, the three main girls each having an on- and offstage persona allowed for some fun to be had with their movements: "The leader is Rumi, she is a hyper-professional perfectionist with a deep, dark secret. She's the ticking time bomb of the movie; she's holding this secret stress while trying to be perfect. And then there's Mira, the tallest, lankiest, [with the] longest hair, and she's the designer and dancer of the group. She's very flowy in her movements, and we tried to have this fun contrast between how graceful she was to how aggressively direct she could be onstage, versus [her] offstage persona. Zoey is the youngest of the group, the shortest of the bunch, and we have this yo-yo between her being the most bubbly, fun, excited, high-motor one of the group and then onstage she gets intense and is much more fiery."

## A World of K-Inspirations

Through their research, Kang and Appelhans sought to make the K-pop backdrop feel as authentic as possible. "We drew inspiration from a different set of influences: music videos, editorial photography, K-dramas, concert lighting, a touch of anime," says Appelhans. "All the artists, animators and lighters on the film embraced that challenge and did a fantastic job to realize our vision."

"[Korean photography] is so good at lighting faces, but when you try to pull that off in CGI, it's very difficult," adds Kang. "Luckily, we're working with Imageworks, who want to do new things we haven't seen in animation. It



**"I wanted to just make a movie that was set in Korean culture, so I delved into mythology and demonology for something that could be visually unique from what we've seen in mainstream media. I've also always wanted to do a group of amazing kick-ass women."**

**DIRECTOR MAGGIE KANG**

took us a long time to hone a style that was very photographic and fashion-forward. We leaned into this editorial look. A lot of the Imageworks team were telling us that they were pulling a lot of their knowledge from working on live-action films to light our movie."

Although Sony is known for innovative animation with the *Spider-Verse* movies' hybrid 2D-3D style, Kang was keen to steer away from it. "Chris and I were invited to the premiere of *Spider-Verse*, and as soon as it started, I texted him saying, 'Oh, no. How are we going to do this?' Because it was just so stunning. They're always breaking boundaries and showing us something new. So, if we played that game, it would be hard to beat [*Spider-Verse*]. So we pulled away from every 2D element in our movie. We took a lot of inspiration from faces and the look and feel of anime but do a CG version of it. There's one thing that we didn't catch, but I think 99.9% of everything is CG."

"It is very much inspired by 2D aesthetics but with three-dimensional language," adds Beveridge. "The movie's on twos a great deal too, so it's very bold, graphic language, except this also has a lot of glamour, and we wanted a lot of lensing and soft focus and the bokeh effect on things as well. That was one of the really interesting challenges to have this very bold graphic look."

Imageworks nevertheless still looked for ways to innovate with *K-Pop: Demon Hunters*,





specifically through character animation techniques. “The range of this movie is a lot. We deal between the very sincere and dramatic to the hyper-ridiculous,” explains Beveridge. “We transform the characters’ faces based on the tone. So in the high-glamour moments, they need to feel like pop stars in an animated world. When we want to get a little bit more animated aggro, we reshape their faces with a lot more line work, a lot more angularity. When we go hyper-ridiculous, there’s a thing we call Chibi, or demi-Chibi, that’s super-cute and exaggerated features. So we had a whole tool set of being able to

## Originals to Save the Day

Original films are the lifeblood of the industry, and Kang found it surreal to be working on one. She says, “I didn’t believe it until a year ago. I was like, ‘They’re going to just change everything.’ Every milestone we hit, I was just waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under me. But it was great. Both Sony and Netflix were very supportive of my vision and Chris’s vision, and there were things that we had to fight for, but they were very supportive, and I know that’s not common. I just want to see more films like this that are very creator-forward.”

much pressure. You’re representing an entire culture,” she says. “I’ve gotten messages like, ‘I don’t know why you’re doing it like this,’ and at first it was very difficult, but I landed in a place where I had to just make a movie that I believed in, and I think it’s important for everybody to know that everyone has a different relationship to their culture. You’re not going to be representing things exactly the same way as somebody else is. It just means that we have to make more movies about every culture.” ■

**KPop Demon Hunters premieres on Netflix on June 20.**



The team also put a premium on authentic stories told by people from diverse backgrounds. Kang laments the dwindling opportunities for people of color to grow in the animation industry. “There’s clearly a lack of training and mentorship that’s all across the board in every department,” she points out. “I do some lectures

have interchangeable facial features we could swap in and out, and we weren’t limited by the geometry of the model.”

Beveridge says he doesn’t feel pressure to innovate on every film he works on. “I think it’s an opportunity. I still feel like animation is in its infancy, as many decades as it’s been around, compared to other mediums and art forms. We’re in the Wild West, in the early days of trying to define it. The mentality that [Sony] doesn’t have a house style has been an evolution that I am so happy to be championing. Every single movie has its own thesis of discovering a new visual language.”

online to share what the important things are with what it means to be a storyboard artist, because I didn’t really fully know what my job was until five years in. When I was coming up, we would all gather in the cafeteria at DreamWorks and talk shop. As you’re doing that, you get to know each other and build these relationships. That’s how you jump from being an artist to a supervisor to a director. I feel like that bridge is not really happening anymore.”

For Kang, the experience of directing *KPop: Demon Hunters* underscored the need for more diverse stories in animation. “There’s so



**“We drew inspiration from a different set of influences: music videos, editorial photography, K-dramas, concert lighting, a touch of anime. All the artists, animators and lighters on the film embraced that challenge and did a fantastic job to realize our vision.”**

**DIRECTOR CHRIS APPELHANS**





DREAMWORKS

# the BAD GUYS

IN THEATERS  
AUGUST 1





# CHARTING A COSMIC ROMANCE



**A Seoul-ful Sojourn:** When an astronaut leaves Earth for Mars, the vast infinite space comes between two star-crossed lovers in the adult Korean animated feature produced by Climax Studio, *Lost in Starlight*.

## Director Han Ji-won looks back in wonder in the new Korean animated feature, *Lost in Starlight*.

By Kambole Campbell

Set in a futuristic Seoul, the new Korean animated film *Lost in Starlight* is a romantic intergenerational, interplanetary story that feels fascinatingly optimistic about humanity's commitment to analog technology. Its director Han Ji-won, herself an animator, illustrator and cartoonist based in Seoul, attributes this optimism to a cycle – a belief that everything comes back around eventually.

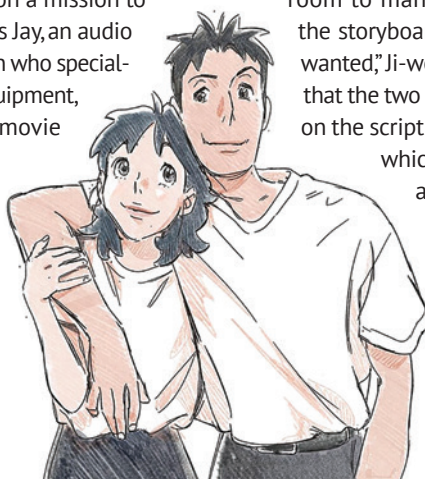
"I thought that just like how we are fascinated with antique objects and music from the past, I'd try to create a universe where the objects that we're in love with right now are still fascinating for the future generation," the director says. "Trends come back, come around every 20-30 years," something that inspired *Lost in Starlight* on a story level, but also in its design, a deliberate collision of the past and the future. It began with a desire to tell a story that travels across generations and continues beyond them. "I thought about a

mother's dream being inherited by a daughter," Ji-won says. She continues, with a laugh: "I thought that, rather than telling the story starting from our past, if the current times that we're living in became the past, it would be much more intriguing for a current audience."

The film, which is produced by Climax Studios and will be distributed by Netflix, features characters who are star-crossed in every sense of the word. Set in the future, the movie centers on Han-young, who is a scientist and astronaut looking to walk in her mother's footsteps on a mission to Mars. One day she meets Jay, an audio repairman and technician who specializes in now-outdated equipment, from our present. The movie sees their relationship turn long distance, as Han-young's ambition takes her to space, and Jay's career keeps him on Earth. The crossing over of these two worlds

may sound like a rather far-reaching romantic match, but in *Lost in Starlight* it feels as natural as anything else.

Part of this comes down to Ji-won's embrace of the input of the two lead actors, Kim Tae-ri and Hong Kyung, who had worked together as recently as the 2023 K-drama *Revenant*. The two were involved at the script stage and Ji-won took advantage of their in-person chemistry. "Even though we had the storyboard and the animatic, there were some scenes where I really wanted to give them more room to maneuver and go beyond the storyboard to do whatever they wanted," Ji-won explains. This meant that the two actors had a lot of input on the script and character work, for which the director enthusiastically praises them. It's reflective of the kind of animation that Ji-won wanted to make, where detail is focused on minute animationmagazine.net





actions – citing work by Mamoru Hosoda and even recent films like *The First Slam Dunk*, where the everyday feels dynamic. After working on tighter schedules and budgets for her short film work and the previous feature *The Summer, Lost in Starlight* had more room for Ji-won to implement such experiments.

More interesting still is how the film's production design iterates on present-day

first inspirations in becoming an illustrator at the comic-book cafe run by her grandmother. One thing led to another, as Ji-won got into drawing cartoons and comics. This sense of nostalgia for these tactile interactions with art bleeds into *Lost in Starlight* – in one of the film's more interesting touches, characters in the movie see pens and paper as archaic. It's not exactly a first for science fiction, but

*Mononoke*, a film which experimented with mixing 2D and 3D digital animation – in fact, a framed poster of the film directed by Hayao Miyazaki sits behind her on the Zoom call. And, as she points out, there's a record player just out of frame, too. Both feel like totems of Ji-won's artistic approach and the ideals reflected in *Lost in Starlight*, tonally influenced by her own nostalgia and built from current trends and practices: while considerate of their cyclical nature.

One of the standout moments of the film is a cosmic visualization of this belief – Nan-young hallucinates in a moment of desperation, and the galaxy becomes a vinyl record. “We see this record-player aesthetic being tied in with the cosmos, so in a way, it becomes a tool for creative directing as well,” Ji-won says. “This concept of retro and analog is not just an element in terms of the aesthetic. I also wanted to instill that sense of nostalgia that people feel when they see these antique objects: objects like



Seoul. “A lot of futuristic images include Earth's buildings with a lot of spaceship-like details, but I thought just adding spaceship details to buildings wouldn't be that useful for a future generation,” Ji-won says. The team also looked at '70s retrofuturism, studying the gap between how past generations imagined the future, and the reality.

Such a divide also meant deepening the visual differences between generations of the city as witnessed now. “One thing that I believe is beautiful about Seoul is that we can see both sparkling, advanced skyscrapers alongside these old colorful houses,” the director says. “So I wanted to highlight this contrast even more: make the old look older and worn-out, and the new things more minimal.” This also extends to things like signage and interfaces: a mixture of holograms, augmented reality and more tangible objects results in a rather unique take on a future society, one that has embraced new technologies but not become overwhelmed by it.

This belief in analog devices and traditional methods enduring goes far back for Ji-won. The animator spoke of finding her

it feels more loaded in the context of animation.

“Really early on in my drawing days, I used to draw everything by hand,” Ji-won reflects. “But even as a student, I was drawing with a pen on a tablet device, even though they were not display devices like the ones we see these days.”

She continues, “Even though the process is quite digitized now, I still prefer and am fascinated by 2D cel animation.” And these considerations of traditional forms of animation, and her own persistent love for older forms of the craft, inspired the line of thinking that led to *Lost in Starlight* – a film born from the optimistic belief that technology of convenience will never kill a love and appreciation of the older ways of doing things. It's appropriate then, that Ji-won attributes her interest in learning to make animation specifically to a first-time viewing of *Princess*



**“Trends come back, come around every 20-30 years. I thought that, it would be much more intriguing to tell the story as if the current times that we're living in became the past.”**

**DIRECTOR HAN JI-WON**

the turntable become a really important tool in the storytelling as well.”

Whether planets, trends in animation processes or music technology, part of the charm of *Lost in Starlight* is this fundamental hopefulness that we won't indiscriminately discard the old for the new – like the record spinning, we'll come back around. ■

***Lost in Starlight* premieres on Netflix on May 30.**





# EXISTENTIAL ARTISTRY

Félix Dufour-Laperrière shares insights into his fascinating new feature *Death Does Not Exist*, one of the strongest movies in competition at Annecy this year.

By Ramin Zahed

**C**anadian writer/director/animator Félix Dufour-Laperrière is no stranger to Annecy and other prestigious animation festivals. His striking and highly original shorts (*M*, *The Day Is Listening*, *Rosa Rosa*) and features (*Ville Neuve*, *Archipelago*) have received much praise at animation events around the world. So it's no surprise that his latest movie, the bold and ambitious feature titled *Death Does Not Exist* (*La mort n'existe pas*) was a Directors' Fortnight selection at the Cannes Festival and a feature competition nominee at Annecy this year.

The 2D-animated entry centers on the dilemmas faced by a young woman who abandons her friends when they make a failed attempt at an armed attack on rich landowners. The talented Montreal-based director was kind enough to answer a few of our questions via Zoom, just days before he took off on his trip to Cannes:

**Animation Magazine: Congratulations on the debut of your sophisticated and thought-provoking movie at Cannes and Annecy. Let's talk about the origins and inspiration of the film.**

**Félix Dufour-Laperrière:** I started writing the script almost 10 years ago, so it evolved a lot in the process. We began work on the movie towards the end of 2020. It was a bit darker and more desperate in tone, but it became more lively, and the focus turned on love, friendship and relationships between the main characters.

**Your movie begins with a group of young activists planning an armed attack against some rich people in a secluded mansion in the country. Was it based on any real-life events?**



It comes from my own political beliefs and the desire to balance our anger against the world and desires to maintain what's decent and livable in society. I have two kids myself, so in a way, it's very personal to me. I tried to also explore my contradictions and intimate paradoxes.

***Death Does Not Exist* is produced by Embuscade, a studio you co-founded with your brother Nicolas in Montreal, and Miyu in France. Can you tell us some more about the production details?**

Yes, exactly, my brother Nicolas and I founded Embuscade Films 12 years ago, and we did a couple of features and a couple of shorts. *Death Does Not Exist* is our biggest project to date. We animated about 80% of it in our studio in Montreal with a team of 27 people, and 20% of the animation was done in France by 15 other





artists at Miyu. Later, we used TVPaint, 12 frames per second. Everything was painted on paper in the beginning and then assembled with After Effects.

My brother Nicolas is the film's producer, and my other brother (Jean L'Appau) composed the music. I come from a Quebec-based tradition of handmade short films, following the line of work done by the National Film Board of Canada. I like to explore the same kind of auteur independence and artistry in a longer format.

**The film has a very selective color palette of greens, oranges and muted yellows, which accentuates its tense moments. Can you talk about the visual style?**

The whole movie is structured within an abstract field of colors. I decided early on not to always distinguish the character from the backgrounds, so if there's a dynamic relationship within the two, it's movement, the framing or their actions that makes them visible. At the same time, characters are part of their backgrounds, and the setting is also emerging from the interior world of the characters. The abstraction reflects the radical nature of the characters and their beliefs.

I'm first and foremost an animation

filmmaker. As I write the script, I am always thinking about the ways I can translate it to animation. I break away from the strict, natural format of the script to include some visual elements that will be animated. That's one of the reasons I love it. It's a very demanding but powerful medium. I'm also a big fan of painting, so I'm also including my love for shapes and colors in

the animated form.

**What were the toughest aspects of the movie to produce?**

The compositing was quite hard, because we had a very challenging forest. I took a lot of liberty in writing this script, and there were a lot of ambitious and long camera moves. When you produce animation, everything that moves becomes expensive, so those







long tracking shots in the forest were difficult to composite. The other demanding part was the coloring because it wasn't a rational process. The colors, the backgrounds were all done intuitively. I tried to pick a certain palette for each sequence and maintain the tension with abstraction but keep the viewer engaged.

**What was your budget for the film?**

It was about 2.8 million dollars, and we

end, it does exist for everyone.

**Did you realize that you wanted to work in animation at a young age?**

As a teenager, I fell in love with cinema. My friend and I would always rent movies on VHS! But I think I was too quiet for the live-action sound and fury. I stumbled upon Jan Švankmajer's work on DVD, and it changed my world. It was such a powerful work of art made by one person under a

without this art form. I'm very happy about the success of *Flow*. I think there's such an honesty about the filmmaking process. It's truly joyous to see it succeed, and I'm very hopeful that there will be an even wider audience for adult animation.

**Do you have any pieces of advice for young animation artists?**

The key is honesty and perseverance. There are a lot of people who are trying to do what they think people will like. But I think it's important to be strictly honest with yourself and with the people you work with, as well as the ideas you're dealing with. In my past personal experiences, that has been a good path to follow.

**THE END OF THE RULING CLASS: Félix Dufour-Laperrière's powerful new animated feature *Death Does Not Exist* centers on a young woman's involvement with an armed group of left-wing rebels.**



really put everything on the screen! Of course, funding it wasn't easy, because it's a difficult film and tough topic to believe in at first. But I feel very lucky that we had such a great team and we were able to finish it.

**Can you elaborate on the enigmatic title of your movie?**

The key paradox is that yes, death does exist. But it's an incantation: It's something they want to believe, just like their other strong beliefs. But the truth catches up. You may think that death doesn't exist for you or for the others who will suffer from the violence you put in the world, but at the

camera. That led me to the world of animation. Another big influence is Gianluigi Toccafondo (*La Piccola Russia*), and I absolutely love Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis' *When the Day Breaks*. In general, I am very much influenced by the experimental shorts that were produced by the National Film Board of Canada.

**What do you think of today's global animation scene?**

I do think that animation is very relevant in our world. There is a lot of animation being made around the world, and many stories are being told that couldn't be possible

**Finally, what kind of impact do you hope your movie will have on audiences?**

I hope it leaves them with a mixture of both light and dark emotions: On one hand, there's anger, unfulfilled desire and the challenge of life, but the movie also underlines the importance of friendship and the responsibility of maintaining a decent and livable society, as well as the importance of love and connections that make us free. ■

***Death Does Not Exist* is one of the films selected for the official competition at Annecy this year.**



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# flower power

***Dandelion's Odyssey*, Momoko Seto's imaginative new movie, offers an emotional adventure story told from the perspective of a plant.**

By Ramin Zahed

**Y**ou know you're in for a treat when the main characters in an animated movie are dandelion seeds, firefly squids, a giant tree frog, a purple sea urchin, flying tadpoles and a diabolical praying mantis! Of course, you can't expect anything ordinary from Momoko Seto's work. The talented Tokyo-born artist, who also works as a film director for the French National Center for Scientific Research, is bringing her latest movie, *Dandelion's Odyssey*, to the Cannes Critic's Week and the Annecy Festival this year.

The director explored similarly unusual subjects in her previous experimental shorts (which focused on small planets named A, Z,  $\Sigma$  and  $\infty$ ). "The movie is fiction, inspired by science," says Seto in an email interview with *Animation Magazine*. "Originally, there were four other small planets — where time-lapse and plants, slow motion and insects, mineral and organic matter, the infinitely large and the infinitely small already coexisted," she explains. "These experimental films sparked in me the desire to go even further in exploring a nonhuman form of storytelling — one that sees the world through a plant's perspective yet carries the emotional stakes and structure of an adventure film!"

## In Search of Home

The movie centers on four friends that crash-land on an unknown planet and have to find a new home to carry on their species. "I choose my characters by researching scientific literature, selecting species for their extraordinary traits. It's these unique behaviors that shape the science-fiction dimension of the film," Seto explains.

To bring her vision to animated life, Seto and her team used a combination of techniques: time-lapse, ultra slow motion, extreme macro, stackshot photography and robotics — all to build each image frame by frame. "Time-lapse is, precisely, the art of compressing time," she points out. "It involves filming a very slow natural phenomenon — often imperceptible to the naked eye — over a given period. By speeding it up, we are finally able to perceive the invisible. Slow motion, on the other hand, is the art of unfolding time. Like time-lapse, the camera captures extremely rapid movements and breaks them down. The filmed subjects begin to transform into 'something else.' In this way, technology is not just a tool to enhance vision — it reveals what lies on the other side of the visible world."

The animation was produced in Belgium, in a studio based in Liège. The team was supervised by renowned animator Guionne

Leroy (*Chicken Run*, *Toy Story*), along with a team of four creative animators. The team relied on Maya and Blender to animate the movie.

"Inside an orangery set up within the Château de Rambuteau in Burgundy, we built a dedicated time-lapse studio," Seto tells us. "Seventeen cameras shooting simultaneously over the course of nine months, capturing 20 miniature sets with different staged plants. A single shot could last anywhere from five to 30 days. The final images are the result of multiple layers, superimposed like a video collage."

This labor of love has been in the making for almost nine years. Seto began writing the film back in 2016 with Alain Layrac, and it took three years to complete. After putting the financing together for another two years, the production began in 2021. "It took over two-and-a-half years," recalls the director. "Postproduction lasted another two years, including one full year dedicated to the creation of the animation, and the music composition stretched over both years."

For Seto, all the hard work has been worth the wait. "I'm very happy to have made a film that is truly unique," she notes. "It's one that touches on something that has never quite [been] done like this before or quite seen before. The story is told from the eye level



**Seeds in Space:** Four dandelion seeds escape from a succession of nuclear explosions and find themselves stranded on an unknown planet in *Dandelion's Odyssey*.

of a dandelion seed, a film that is neither a documentary nor fully an animated film, nor entirely fiction.

"The music and sound design are entirely in tune with the immersive experience the film offers. It's really about wonder — the awe that we feel before the beauty and power of nature. And the final scene still brings me to tears every time!"

### Time-Lapse Trials

One of the film's biggest challenges was keeping the main characters' emotions understandable throughout the film. "This wasn't easy considering the fact that the main character is basically a stick with a few hairs on its head!" shares Seto. "The other tough challenge was to successfully layer footage of animals shot in a studio in France, with vast Icelandic landscapes filmed by drone and tiny plants captured in time-lapse inside a greenhouse — across 666 shots. That was really demanding."

When asked about her biggest animation influences, Seto mentions a wide range of eclectic artists. "In terms of technique, I have to include the films of Jan Švankmajer, Michel Gondry's music videos, as well as many art videos — including works by Pipilotti Rist, Mihai Greco and Erkkä Nissinen," she says. "As for my animation hero, it would undeniably be Hayao Miyazaki. I discovered *Nausicaä* when I was six, and my mother tells me I used to watch it on repeat — every single day!"

As her movie gets ready to bask in the limelight during festival season, Seto hopes audiences will also heed its gentle message. "Nature is not a backdrop to be trampled on, that it is not something separate from us," she says. "All the small things around us are actors in an action film, and a plant's growth is so beautiful it can bring us to tears. We are all forces of nature, connected to one another, and together, we form our own planet."

***Dandelion's Odyssey* is produced by Miyu Productions, Ecce Films and UMedia. It is one of 10 films selected to compete in the feature film category at Annecy.**



**"I choose my characters by researching scientific literature, selecting species for their extraordinary traits. It's these unique behaviors that shape the science-fiction dimension of the film."**

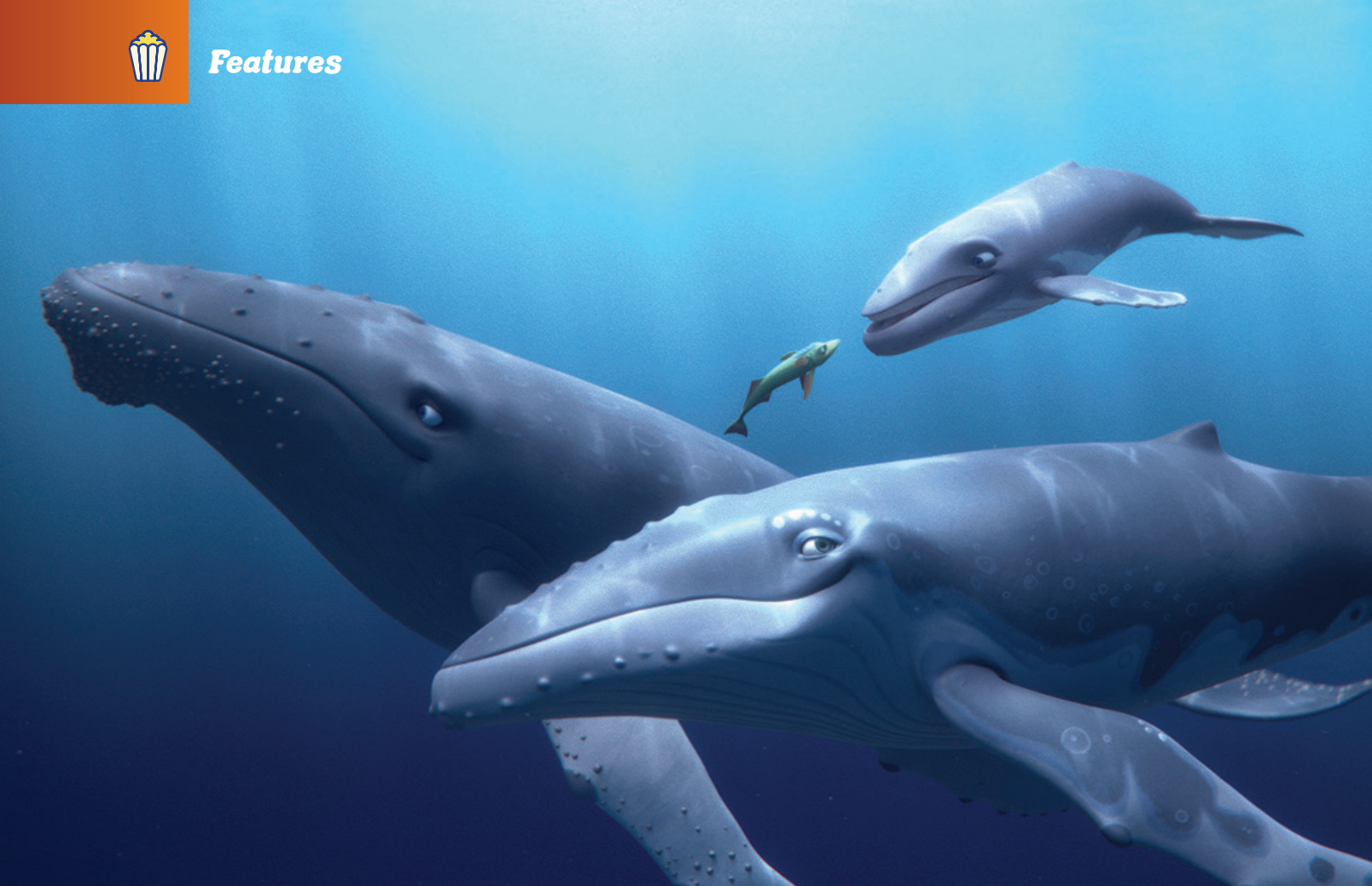
**DIRECTOR MOMOKO SETO**







## Features





# A Song of Resilience

We take a deep dive into the new German-Czech-Canadian feature *The Last Whale Singer* with talented writer-director Reza Memari.

Over 15 years ago, German-Iranian filmmaker Reza Memari was watching a documentary about humpback whales and discovered that the giant mammals have actual singers in their tribe. “It’s still unclear why they sing and what the songs mean, but I was absolutely fascinated,” says the writer-director of the new animated feature *The Last Whale Singer*. “Right away, an image came into my mind of a humpback who doesn’t have a song. There’s something universally relatable about finding your voice in a world that sometimes makes it difficult to be heard.”

That’s how the journey of *The Last Whale Singer* began. Produced by Telescope Animation, the movie will be released in Germany this summer. “At that time, I was still making *Richard the Stork* (U.S. title: *A Stork’s Journey*), which is about a tiny orphaned sparrow who is raised by a stork family and believes he’s a stork too. The idea of exploring a gigantic animal with zero self-confidence as my next project intrigued me!”

After several years of marine research and story development, Memari pitched *The Last Whale Singer* to Telescope Animation co-founder, producer Maite Wokoek, who connected with the idea and set the whole moviemaking process into motion. “I scribbled down my first notes in 2011, started developing the treatment in 2015 and completed the first screenplay draft in 2018,” Memari recalls. “We started preproduction in 2020 with the first beat boards and then went into full production in 2023. Production is scheduled to wrap in June 2025, so it’s been a long, intensive and deeply satisfying journey!”

The film, which is a co-production between Germany’s Telescope Animation Studios in Hamburg, PFX in the Czech Republic and Agora Animation in Canada, was animated in Maya, and rendered

in Unreal Engine (about 75%) and Houdini (25%). According to the director, around 100 people worked on the project.

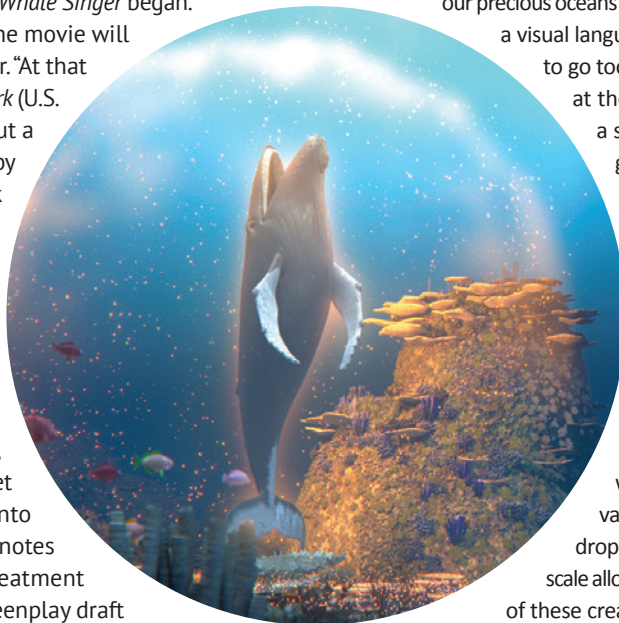
## A Whale of a Job

Of course, as any fan of marine life will tell you, the giant, swimming creatures and their watery habitats are not the easiest things to bring to life in CG animation.

“I believe whales are the most elegant and graceful animals on Earth, swimming through the most mysterious and breathtaking places on our planet,” says Memari. “I wanted to do these majestic creatures and our precious oceans justice, so from the beginning I envisioned a visual language that isn’t too stylized. I didn’t want to go too cartoony because, for me, that comes at the cost of emotional depth, real stakes, a sense of genuine danger and ultimately grief. Much like in *The Lion King* (1994), I wanted to portray a timeless world that feels close to our own, while speaking its own distinct visual language.”

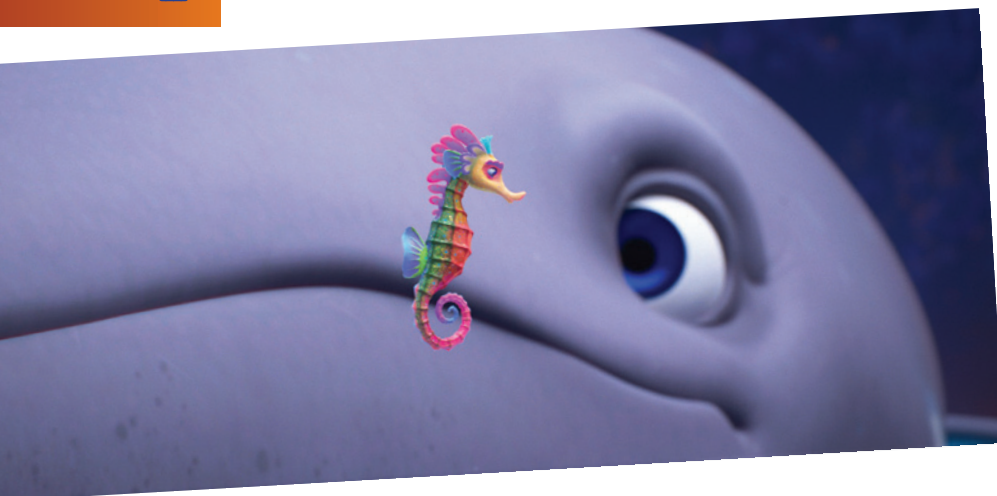
The director says he didn’t want to tarnish the natural beauty of the amazing marine species featured in the movie. “Then there’s the amazing scale of these animals,” he adds. “Compared to a crab, the whale is enormous, but when you place that same whale into the vast ocean, he suddenly seems like just a drop of water. This play with perspective and scale allows us to balance the awe-inspiring majesty of these creatures with the intimate vulnerability of Vincent’s emotional journey. There’s something very powerful about seeing such an enormous being experience such profound self-doubt. The visual style helps us feel both the vastness of the ocean and the depth of our characters’ inner worlds, which was essential for a story about finding your voice.”

The enormity of the film’s challenges did not escape Memari’s mind. “Right from the start, we wanted to take innovative paths and use Unreal Engine for production — and we did!” he says. “However, because the tech was still relatively new and untested back then, we had to learn and teach ourselves everything and build a whole new real-time pipeline. After some tests, we realized we couldn’t achieve a satisfying look for



**A Song of Freedom:** Reza Memari and his team relied on Maya, Unreal and Houdini to tell the engaging story of a resilient whale who hits the right notes in *The Last Whale Singer*.





all shots that take place above the water, so we used Houdini to simulate and render everything above the surface.”

Of course, the film’s underwater setting demanded moving particles, caustics on characters and sets, God rays from above and a water surface. “It’s been quite a challenge to get these many moving parts under control and balanced throughout numerous shots, to maintain continuity and believability,” says the director. “Another tricky aspect was scale and scale differences. When you’re dealing with whales, you’re dealing with creatures that are 16 meters long. Finding the right balance in storyboard and layout, figuring out ways to frame shots where a ginormous humpback whale is conversing with a tiny seahorse, conveying feelings and playing with all these size differences was difficult but fun. And later on, rendering all these animals in our unbelievably vast sets was incredibly demanding!”

The team was also tasked with storyboarding and animating more of the characters, whose eyes are on the sides of their heads. “I can’t tell you how many headaches our storyboard artists and animators had because they had to put all the emotions and acting nuances into a single eye, instead of using two,” recalls Memari. “In hindsight, I understand why they moved the eyes together in *Finding Nemo*! Also, the vast array of different species made rigging and animating complex, because you basically have to start from scratch when you have a fish rig but now need to build a jellyfish rig. The jellyfish and the enormous Leviathan were among the hardest characters to rig and animate!”

The fact that the movie had to be made with the scaled-back budget of a European feature production was another hurdle to overcome. “I had to shorten the script, reduce the runtime, trim the cast, simplify sets, scale back FX — you name it,” says the helmer. “Of course, this is

simply the reality of filmmaking; you never have enough money (even in Hollywood, I have learned). But honestly, none of these reductions hurt the core of the film. In fact, I’d argue that these limitations and necessary cuts actually made the story stronger. The constraints forced us to focus on what truly mattered to Vincent’s journey, which ultimately resulted in a more focused and emotionally resonant film.”

But all the hard work has been worth it for the filmmaker and his team. “This film is such a labor of love,” he says. “Everyone on this multinational team put their heart and soul into the production, and I think it really shows.



**“These days, it’s so easy to be intimidated, retreat, stay silent. Instead, I want audiences to find their voices, collaborate and ‘sing’ for freedom and peace.”**

**WRITER-DIRECTOR  
REZA MEMARI**

Together, we’ve created a glorious, sonorous world filled with magical, funny, mysterious creatures. I can’t help but feel that we’ve all put in the hard work to help our main character Vincent find his song, and I couldn’t be more grateful to everyone who contributed with such passion. There’s something fitting about a film about finding harmony that required such wonderful teamwork to create.”

When asked about his overall visual style as a director, Memari modestly responds, “This is only my second film, so I’m not sure I have a signature style yet. *The Last Whale Singer* is about finding your voice and making it really helped me find mine. I’ve definitely become more confident in my writing and directing and in managing projects of this scale. I’ve also become much calmer regarding the process itself. I’m learning to actually enjoy the journey rather than just focusing on the destination. Which is somewhat fitting for a film about whales, isn’t it?”

### Triumph of the Indies

The 49-year-old director is also optimistic about the future of European animation. “We are in a time of flux,” he says. “Everything is changing: technologies, societies, norms, costs and audiences. It’s difficult for me to predict where we’re headed. If you had told me before the Oscars this year that a Latvian film with a \$4 million budget could win against the Goliaths of Hollywood, I would have said you’re crazy. But it happened. Why? Because the director, Gints Zilbalodis, had a story to tell, a pure vision, made with good, non-greedy intentions and so much heart. And in the case of *Flow*, I’m doubly happy because, just like *The Last Whale Singer*, it’s an original story, not based on any safe-haven IP. So, I think as long as we keep making films that have an intention, a voice and meaning, we’ll be discovered and cherished across the globe.”

And what does he hope audiences will take away from Vincent’s journey? “Just like our main character, I would like audiences to leave the theater feeling empowered, with a boost of self-confidence and courage to overcome their fears. These days, it’s so easy to be intimidated, retreat, stay silent. Instead, I want audiences to find their voices, collaborate and ‘sing’ for freedom and peace.” ■

***The Last Whale Singer* will sing its song worldwide in 2026.**



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# FAMILY SNAPSHOTS



**T**hose who have been following the interesting career of French writer-director Michel Gondry know that he easily switches between the worlds of music videos, live-action movies and animated ventures. Fortunately, the man best known for co-writing and directing the Oscar-winning movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *The Science of Sleep* (2006) and award-winning music videos by Björk, Daft Punk and The White Stripes, is back on the animation trail this year. In June, he will bring two personal animated features — *Maya, Give Me a Title* and its sequel, *Maya, Give Me Another Title* — to the Annecy Festival. He is also the recipient of the festival's Honorary Cristal (alongside Joanna Quinn and Matt Groening). We recently had the chance to catch up with the multitasking director to find out more

about his animated double bill, for which he collaborated with his young daughter, Maya: **Animation Magazine: First of all, congrats on a very productive year and the upcoming Cristal award at Annecy. Can you tell us the origins of your first Maya movie?**

**Michel Gondry:** I guess it all started when I bought a smartphone and it allowed you to do some basic animation. That's when I started to play this game with my daughter, who was only three years old at the time. She's 10 now! She would ask me to give her a title, and we would play this game where we would create this small story together. Each one would take from one to three weeks to complete.

**Were these little animated projects also a great way for you to keep in touch with her as you were traveling?**

It was a way to re-create our family from afar.

Her mom would read the texts to her in the early years, but even later, when she learned to read, she would still ask her mother to read them to her, because she wanted to continue the experience in the same way. I was mostly in Los Angeles during the COVID lockdown, and she was in Paris and Brittany, and it helped me stay positive during that time. Most of the animation was done using paper cutouts. I found this cheap paper at the drugstore, and they had these perfect color nuances for skin tones because they were already a bit faded. I would do these big backgrounds with paper and drawings. I have a system where I put my camera, and I move the things little by little and I take a picture each time. We put them together using Premiere or whatever program we have. About two years ago, we decided to compile all the segments and create a movie. I



think I will probably do more animated projects in the future.

#### And how did the sequel come about?

Once we saw how the first movie was received, we decided to go back and put another compilation together. The second part also features nine or 10 segments. It's very similar to the first film, but some segments are a bit different. For example, when Maya was in third grade, I went to her classroom and asked all the students to create their own characters and pick their favorite backdrops. A lot of them picked a magic castle. It was really fun because the

feels to make animation using the technology that I'm familiar with.

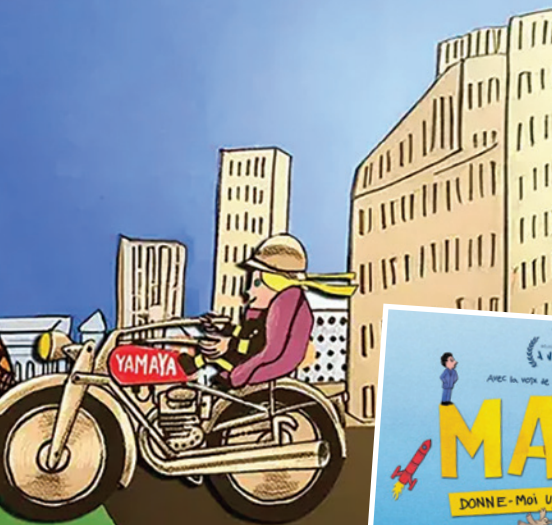
#### What would you say is the best part of the animation experience for you?

Of course, I love the connection that we created with my daughter. People seem to respond to that. I love the fact that it all started from a very simple notion from Maya and then, I could create the most absurd and complicated ideas based on them. She was the main character in each story most of the time, but I tried to incorporate her mother and grandparents and myself, too. I'm also kind of proud of the

#### scene in 2025?

Well, I remember the first film that was fully done in CGI, I think it was *Toy Story* by Pixar, and I was absolutely blown away not only by the technique (although it looks very primitive by today's standards) but also by the complex lighting and the story. But today, when you go to see a movie, you see 10 trailers for CG-animated movies, and they all feel and look alike. Everything looks quite stagnant. Even if they want to do something like classic Disney movies from the 1970s, it's going to still be generated by a computer. I think you

## Director Michel Gondry on the creative journey of his new father-daughter movie *Maya, Give Me a Title* and its sequel.



background art I created for the movie. We did one film with all of Maya's classmates. She is not the type of person to brag about it, but she has been very sweet about it. She's very focused. I don't know if she will get into animation, but she's very good with the camera. I will definitely try to use her in my movies again!

#### When did you fall in love with animation?

I was very young. I was very intrigued by the fact that when you look at many drawings in a very short time, you'll stop seeing static images and your eyes will see motion. I thought it was magical, so I started to do flipbooks and would draw on the corner of the pages of my books. Later

on, as I got older, I bought a camera and did more sophisticated projects, but I always tried to keep things simple. In terms of things that I used to watch, there was a great Italian-French show called *Chapi-Chapo* and a Polish show called *The Adventures of Colargol*. I liked the classic Disney movies, but I also liked Eastern European and Russian animation even more when I discovered them later on.

#### What is your take on the big animation

need to do things without overthinking the aesthetics. With AI, you get to see the patterns and the limitations of the technology. I mean, if you look at *Titanic*, it was the first movie that really used a lot of CG images, but now it can look dated. I have used AI maybe a couple of times in the past, and you realize that it's not capable of creation, because it just collects everything that exists before and mixes them. It feels like what lazy students do in the classroom, when they have to write an essay that should be 30 sentences long, and they only have 20 sentences, so they just fluff it up to reach the word count. It's like using test screenings. They flatten the results and undercut the creativity.

#### Before we let you go, what is your go-to advice for young people who want to get into animation?

Learn to be patient. I often see animated projects that are really "jolt." They don't use enough images. Remember, you have to do 12 images per second and incorporate very small movements. Also, it's important to finish your work. You don't have to be too ambitious. Just make sure you complete your work and show it as a finished project! ■

**Michel Gondry's two *Maya, Give Me a Title* films will be screened at Annecy. *Maya, Give Me Another Title* will open in France on June 18.**

different personalities of all her classmates came through in that segment. It gave us a bit more freedom, and I think it has a more diverse selection.

#### What do you think of the new technologies that are now available for animation?

With new technologies, you have to keep learning. But for me, I use more primitive systems, so I don't have to learn each time. My concentration and energies can go directly into the creativity. I can focus on the story ideas, the shapes of the character, the colors. When I have the idea and I storyboard it, I know exactly how I'm going to make it work. I like the way it







# HERE BE MORE Dragons

Director  
Dean DeBlois  
details the making of  
his live-action version  
of *How to Train  
Your Dragon*.

By Jeff Spry

Entrusted with the daunting task of guiding DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon*'s Viking clan and its winged beasts from the animation dimension into a live-action/CGI feature, Oscar-nominated writer and director Dean DeBlois (*Lilo & Stitch*) had the fortitude to accept the challenge with Nordic-style bravery and determination.

"I think there's a lane to pick," DeBlois tells *Animation Magazine*. "So it was either going to be a story inspired by *How to Train Your Dragon* or a more faithful version of the books, and all of these possibilities were discussed. Ultimately, we thought let's tell the story that we know works, that the fans know and have developed an affection for and then try to be additive."

## How to Adapt a Classic

In 2010, DeBlois and co-director Chris Sanders helmed DreamWorks Animation's first adaptation of the award-winning children's

book series of the same name by British author and illustrator Cressida Cowell. It was followed by two animated sequels, 2014's *How to Train Your Dragon 2* and 2019's *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World*, both also directed by DeBlois.

Originally resistant to being involved in "lazy" live-action projects, DeBlois changed his tune when he considered the positive aspects of dipping back into the world of Hiccup and Toothless and having the chance to ensure any live-action version didn't diminish the core qualities of his animated trilogy. This new adaptation stars Gerard Butler, Mason Thames and Nico Parker and serves as a retelling of the original animated movie. Not to mention that the historical-fantasy property is an invaluable IP as evidenced by the immersive Isle of Berk land at Universal's new \$7 billion theme park, Epic Universe.

"There were two motivating factors," he shares. "Yes, the moment that I had the conversation with Universal, I was recalling what I'd said about these live-action remakes. I feel

like they lack purpose and therefore seem like missed opportunities. You could be putting that budget toward something that's original, that's going to delight audiences and might even create a new franchise for you. But I understand it's a risk-averse environment, that these are huge, expensive movies. I feel very protective of the characters and the worlds. Though I didn't feel like it necessarily needed to be done, I'm very proud of the animated movies. I felt like I'd put a period on the end of that, the statement of those three acts becoming one larger coming-of-age [story]."

DeBlois, who is already working on the live-action *Dragon* sequel slated for 2027, says there were several ways the live-action version expands on the original film's offerings. "There were things we did for the animated movies because we were under a time pressure," he notes. "[Now] we could indulge the mythology more of how this tribe came together, we could indulge the character depth a little bit more, give a little more attention to characters that were a bit shortchanged, like Astrid. She's a

**Flight Plans:** Dean DeBlois brings his magical touch to the live-action version of *How to Train Your Dragon*, which features Mason Thames, Nico Parker and Gerald Butler (reprising his animated role).





compelling character even in the animated movies, but I felt like understanding where she came from, why she has this acrimonious relationship with Hiccup, those presented themselves as opportunities.”

And then there was the depiction of the dragons’ flight in live action. “We could explore the visceral, grounded quality of what would it feel like to actually fly a dragon. We wouldn’t lean into fantasy but into the photoreal quality of it, if you could have dragons living and breathing among us. What would it feel like

**“We went through the same design phase we would in animation. We were going for the realism of rippling muscles under skin that has different levels of reflectivity and understanding the skeletons in a really thorough way.”**

**WRITER-DIRECTOR DEAN DEBLOIS**

to climb onto the back of it and fly and experience that in its full IMAX glory? I thought I’d put my money where my mouth is and try to do a version that’s made with love and attention, without trying to replace the animated movies.”

In translating material from one medium to another, creators must always be mindful of what to embrace and which elements must be enhanced due to technological limitations or restrictions.

“Where can we make it more immersive, deepen the mythology or enrich the characters and give more attention to those relationships?” DeBlois explains. “When you have actors on a set and you allow them to play out a scene and create a cadence and allow time for pacing the dialog, something magical happens. You’re not crafting the performance as you do in animation, selecting the best bits from multiple takes and putting them together and having animators bring their interpretation to it. It’s just what the actors are offering, including everything they do physically. You’re making sure all the pieces are in place so actors can feel the freedom to embody the characters and be part of the scene and shape it. Then there’s a truth that emerges.”

And what of those magnificent magical dragons, and how did DeBlois and his team

manifest this menagerie? Which VFX tools were used to breathe life into them? Well, it seems that it wasn’t so foreign of a process from what the director was already familiar with.

“That’s sort of the way we create feature animation with CGI as well, with the exception [that] as we’re filming the actors we would have puppeteers,” notes DeBlois. “A guy named Tom Wilton and his whole team of puppeteers had creations like these foam heads and bodies of the dragons that are done exactly to spec.



They’d puppeteer the dragons in the shots, so not only could the cameraman frame for where the dragon would be, but they would prefer it so the actor would have something to play off of; he wasn’t just looking at a tennis ball.

“That gave you a pretty truthful performance, that when handed off to the visual effects team and animation team at Framestore, they’re able to replace that foam dragon with iterations of the animation. We went through the same design phase we would in animation. We were going for the realism of rippling muscles under skin that has different levels of reflectivity and understanding the skeletons in a really thorough way. We were referencing real animals, just as we did in the animated movies. So there’s the crocodile dragon, the hippo dragon, there’s the walrus dragon, the parrot dragon, the panther dragon, and they all have very specific animal cues.”

#### **Mixing Science and Whimsy**

Aiding DeBlois in crafting this rowdy new Norse saga of clashing worlds is Framestore’s visual effects supervisor Christian Manz and Glen McIntosh, who served as *How to Train Your Dragon*’s animation supervisor. McIntosh

is a veteran of the *Jurassic Park* movies and got his start with Industrial Light & Magic, working with George Lucas on *Star Wars: Episodes I-III*.

“You’ve got the whimsy of what Framestore does so well with *Paddington* and *Fantastic Beasts* and you’ve got these amazing creatures that are full of personality,” he adds. “Then you also have that very informed paleontology angle that Glen brings, understanding creatures of that size and their movement and how that factors into their performance.

And just some really stellar animators that were acting as character supervisors across all of the Framestore studios (based in London, Montreal, Melbourne and Mumbai).”

DeBlois says having the whole Framestore team take on the movie exclusively was quite an amazing experience. “In the flying scenes, in order to make Hiccup feel like he was part of the dragon movement, like a jockey on a horse, we had these eight-axis gimbals that would on command tilt any way you want,” he notes. “On top of that, they built an animatronic dragon body, neck and head, so that when Mason was sitting in his saddle the thing could rise up and turn and bank, on top of a gimbal that’s already moving. The kid’s weight would be thrown around, and since he’s holding onto the neck but sitting in the saddle, it meant there would be movement across the dragon’s body that influences how Mason Thames would be holding on. And that made for really convincing visceral flight. It was incredible!” ■

**DreamWorks’ *How to Train Your Dragon* opens nationwide on June 13.**



# First Look at a Magical World

**Writer-Producer Tony Nottage offers a sneak peek at Two Daughters Entertainment's spellbinding new feature, *The Land of Sometimes*.**

**T**he new animated British feature set *The Land of Sometimes* is one of the eagerly anticipated family features of the year. Produced by Two Daughters Entertainment and Nottage Productions, the beautifully crafted production is based on the acclaimed audiobook by Francesca Longrigg. The film's producer and screenwriter **Tony Nottage** answered a few of our questions about this exciting project:

**Congrats on the progress of your new movie. Can you tell us a bit about the history and current status of the movie?**

**Tony Nottage:** At its heart, it's a magical adventure that explores the power of imagination, gratitude, and the importance of family. I'm really pleased to have **Leon Joosen** directing the movie. Leon and I have worked together for a few years now on the *Saving Santa* feature as well as the Moley TV series, and he's always brought something special to the table.

Leon started at Disney,

mentored by **Erik Larson**, and went on to work as an animator on *The Little Mermaid* before moving into directing under **Roy Disney** on films like *Scooby-Doo* and *Aliens in the Attic*. He's got that rare blend of creative vision and hands-on experience, and always brings heart and character to a story. With Leon on board, I genuinely believe *The Land of Sometimes* is in the best possible hands. Production will be complete on *The Land of Sometimes* by August 2025 with a release planned by the end of the year.

**Can you tell us more about the voice cast and the characters they play?**

Yes, we are also lucky to have a brilliant voice cast bringing this magical story to life: **Ewan McGregor** voices The Wish Collector, a mysterious figure believed to be a myth. **Helena Bonham Carter** stars as Mediocris (Latin for Fairy), a wildly energetic and mischievous fairy who delights in making a mess. At first, Elise



**Tony Nottage**

finds her thrilling—but chaos quickly follows!

The legendary **Mel Brooks** takes on the role of The Postman, who also serves as our narrator. He brings warmth and humor as he introduces us to Alfie, Elise, and their family. But there's more to him than meets the eye. **Asa Butterfield** voices The Lad with the Flying Feet, a cheerful character with magical feet that lift him into the air.

**Alisha Weir** voices Elise, who is the elder of the twins, only by a few minutes, but she will never let Alfie forget it. After their father left and didn't return, Elise struck out at the world, bitter and resentful. This adventure will teach both Elise and Alfie that the most important thing in life is family, love and friendship. **Jessica Henwick** play the children's loving mother. Of East Asian heritage, she's left to care for the family alone when her Navy husband goes missing in action. Alfie and Elise don't fully understand her strength—until their time in the Land of Sometimes opens their eyes.

We're absolutely delighted to be working with the wonderful **Maggie Rodford** (*Wicked*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, *The Boxtrolls*, *Brave*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*) on *The Land of Sometimes* as music supervisor. Maggie is a hugely respected figure in the world of film music, and it's a real

privilege to have her overseeing the music for the film. We're also very thrilled that EGOT winner **Sir Tim Rice** (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*) has signed to write three new songs for the feature.

**Would you care to share more about the film's storyline?**

Our story follows the journey of twins, Elise and Alfie, who, on Christmas Eve wish for a better life. As midnight approaches, the strange and mysterious Wish Collector whisks them to a far off mythical island where all their wishes can come true. As they encounter the island's unique characters, the twins discover they not only need to endure the land's four seasons in one day and its delicate nature, but their own selfish wishes. The only way out is for them to discover what they truly wish for, which of course, is the last thing they expect!

With mesmerizing original songs intertwined with this magical journey of discovery, the twins will finally discover that there really is no place like home!

The film's international sales are handled by Kaleidoscope Film Distribution.

**Production will be complete on *The Land of Sometimes* by August 2025 with a release planned by the end of the year. The film is directed by Leon Joosen and exec produced by Bonnie Arnold and Alan Yentob alongside Two Daughters' executive chairman James Reatchlous and CEO Simon Bobin, as well as Spencer Pollard of Kaleidoscope Film Distribution.**

**See the exclusive 'first look' of *The Land of Sometimes* at the Two Daughters Entertainment Showcase at the Annecy Festival and Market, Imperial Palace, Salle de l'Europe, 11am on Friday June 13th.**





EWAN  
MCGREGOR

HELENA  
BONHAM CARTER

ASA  
BUTTERFIELD

ALISHA  
WEIR

ANDREI  
SHEN

TERRY  
JONES

AND  
MEL  
BROOKS

WITH SONGS BY  
TIM  
RICE

AND  
PETE  
HOBBS

# The LAND of SOMETIMES

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TV/STREAMING



# THE BOYS OF SUMMER ARE BACK!

Expect lots of fun shenanigans, music and mayhem when *Phineas and Ferb* is revived on Disney Channel and Disney+ this month.

By Ramin Zahed

**B**ack in the summer of 2007, Disney Channel audiences were introduced to two very likable stepbrothers name Phineas Flynn and Ferb Fletcher, who tried to make the most of their summer vacation(s). This year, the resourceful brothers, their secret-agent pet platypus Perry and their annoying tattletale sis Candace are all back for more adventures in a fun-filled new season of *Phineas and Ferb*.

The show's original creators and exec producers Dan Povenmire and Jeff "Swampy" Marsh (who also voice Dr. Heinz Doofenshmirtz and Maj. Francis Monogram, respectively, on the series) recently chatted with *Animation Magazine* about the big return of their five-time Emmy-winning series.

"I think what happened was that kids and maybe some older viewers found *Phineas and Ferb* again on Disney+ during the pandemic," says Povenmire. "It became their comfort show during that time. So, Disney came to us and said the show is always in the top

five shows on the streamer. Would you guys like to make some more for us? We had done this movie for them in 2020, which had also outperformed a lot of things with much bigger budgets, and we said, 'Of course!' because we're always interested in doing more with these characters. They asked for 40 more episodes, and luckily, we were able to make our schedules work!"

## No Fixes Required!

He adds, "They literally said, we don't think it's broken, so you don't have to fix it. But that



**Brothers of Invention:**  
Phineas and Ferb return for more madcap adventures on Disney Channel and Disney+ this summer.



being said, you have the autonomy to do with it whatever you want. We were like, 'Well, we don't think it's broken either, but there's a bunch of new stories we'd love to tell,' so that's what we did!"

Marsh says that the great thing about this new offer was that they weren't asked to reinvent the premise or change the designs of the original show. "They just liked what the show was, and they wanted more of what made it special," he says.

"I'm proudest of the fact that it just feels like the old show, but in a lot of ways, a lot of episodes feel like we've elevated it in a certain way. It doesn't feel like a reimagining," adds Povenmire. "Our goal was if you're watching this on Disney+ and you finished the fourth season and went straight to Season Five, you wouldn't notice a glitch at all. It just feels right. A lot of big things happen through the course of a season, but we're not a serialized show. Mostly, things happen, and then it all goes back to zero and we start again."

Marsh adds, "As much as the world has changed since we came up with the idea for the show, kids are still smarter than everybody thinks they are!"

The origin of *Phineas and Ferb* is now the

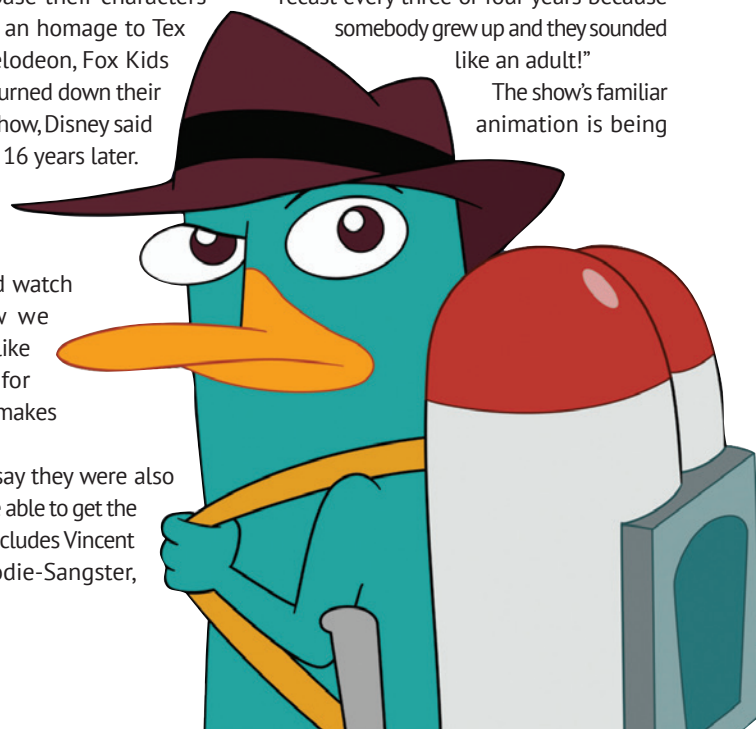
stuff of TV animation lore: Povenmire and Marsh first met when they were layout artists on *The Simpsons*. They became good friends and were working on Nickelodeon's *Rocko's Modern Life* when they came up with the basic premise for *Phineas and Ferb*. Povenmire drew a quick sketch of a kid with a triangle-shaped head on butcher paper one day as he was eating in a Pasadena restaurant. Soon, the creators decided to base their characters on angular shapes as an homage to Tex Avery. Although Nickelodeon, Fox Kids and Cartoon Network turned down their initial pitches for the show, Disney said yes to the idea almost 16 years later.

Povenmire recalls, "When we first started out, we had no idea where anybody would watch this show, and now we have people who are like chomping at the bit for new episodes, so that makes us very happy!"

The show creators say they were also lucky because they were able to get the original cast — which includes Vincent Martella, Thomas Brodie-Sangster,

Ashley Tisdale, Dee Bradley Baker and Caroline Rhea — for the revival. "When we hired the kids' voices, they were already doing their version of their voices," recalls Povenmire. "Phineas was 14, so Vincent was giving us a cartoon voice to match the character. As he got older, his voice changed, but he could still do the voice. So we were very fortunate, because I've been on kids' shows where they had to recast every three or four years because somebody grew up and they sounded like an adult!"

The show's familiar animation is being







handled by the hardworking and talented team at Snipple Animation in Manila, Philippines. “They did the best work for our recent *Phineas and Ferb* movie. We had very few retakes with them, so they took the whole show this time,” says Marsh.

The producers point out that the show’s 10-person writers’ room (which includes Povenmire and Marsh) is made up of people who worked on the original series and those who grew up on *Phineas and Ferb*. “We have a guy on our staff [Sunny Karnan] who is like a walking encyclopedia of the show, so we don’t even have to check Wiki if we can’t remember when something happened,” says Povenmire. “We just have to ask Sunny because he knows everything about the show.”

“Olivia Olson, who voiced Vanessa on the show, is now in our writers’ room with her dad, Martin, who has also been with us the whole

says Povenmire. “I saw a trailer for a movie the other day that I thought was for real. It looked like a live-action version of *Invincible*. It had all these big actors and looked cool and cinematic, but the scenes were very brief and not a lot seemed to be happening. That’s what AI seems to be good at.”

Marsh also points out that AI seems to result in very safe and homogenous storytelling. “If we had followed those safe and predictable paths, *Phineas and Ferb* would never happen,” he says. “People were telling us that we had made mistakes in the concept for the show. Their logic seemed



setting. The story is what Candace and Perry and Doofenshmirtz are doing.”

The creators mention the popular John Hughes’ movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* as an inspiration for their series. “That movie was one of the models for our show, because just like Ferris, our boys are a catalyst for other people’s journeys,” notes Marsh. “It’s that same spirit of unending positivity. That’s what

other people are reacting to around them. I think that’s why it all works.”

And what do they hope the show’s return will mean for audiences around the world? “I hope they feel as if *Phineas and Ferb* is back,

“I’m proudest of the fact that it just feels like the old show, but in many ways, a lot of the episodes feel like we’ve elevated it in a certain way.”  
SHOW CO-CREATOR DAN POVENMIRE

“I would like to see people embrace that ‘no jerks and idiots’ type of storytelling because our world could really use a good dose of kindness and positivity right now!”  
SHOW CO-CREATOR JEFF “SWAMPY” MARSH



time,” says Marsh. “We also have two writers on the show who were part of our storyboard team, so they have experience in all phases of the production. They know when the board artists can play and know how to write for that. They also know how not to leave things too open-ended!”

### Saying No to AI Oatmeal

When asked about the dangers of AI in animation, Marsh and Povenmire both feel strongly about the limitations of the technology. “I think it’s a dangerous, slippery slope,”

sound. They said we won’t be able to do 26 episodes with our main characters. AI also leads people away from weird and quirky content. It makes nice plain oatmeal, but I like mine with fruit and brown sugar.”

“This one person, who we think is really brilliant, told us that the problem with our show was that our characters don’t have any flaws, never do anything wrong on purpose, and they don’t have character arcs,” Povenmire recalls. “But we weren’t writing that kind of a show. What our two main characters are doing is not the story — they are almost like the

and that it’s exactly how they remember it. There’s just newer, fresher episodes,” says Povenmire.

Marsh agrees. “I would like to see more people embrace that ‘no jerks and idiots’ type of storytelling, because our world could really use a good dose of kindness and positivity right now!” ■

***Phineas and Ferb*’s new season premieres on Disney Channel and Disney XD on June 5. The first 10 episodes will then begin streaming on June 6 on Disney+.**







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TV/STREAMING



# BETTER CALL GAUL!

By Rich Johnson

If René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's iconic characters, Asterix and Obelix, were to settle anywhere, it would be Toulouse. The duo has found a new home at TAT Productions, located in the south of France's "Pink City." The region's distinctly bohemian atmosphere is reflected in what the area has inspired artistically over the years, including as host to many animation-related events such as Cartoon Forum and Cartoon Movie every year. Therefore, it's no surprise that everyone's energy and love for Asterix is so immediately apparent.

Produced by Alain Goldman, *Asterix & Obelix: The Big Fight* is a true legacy project, with TAT setting out to deliver a wealth of tools and resources guided by co-directors Alain Chabat and Fabrice Joubert. With the help of production designer Aurélien Predal, the miniseries

**How directors Alain Chabat and Fabrice Joubert maintained the legacy and fighting spirit of cherished comic characters in *Asterix & Obelix: The Big Fight*.**

aims to bring the property to a wider audience. Predal previously provided art direction for the 2014 CGI movie *Asterix: The Mansions of the Gods* and has also worked on the visual development for *Inside Out 2*, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* and *Ron's Gone Wrong*, bringing both familiarity and innovation to the world.

Here, Chabat and Joubert faced the challenge of making a new animated Asterix for a modern audience. Predal says he was more than aware of the tricky balance in making it timeless yet contemporary. "We've had to respect the original material but also define our own universe with an objective to push the talent and knowledge of the team at TAT," he says as he presents examples of his Saul Bass-inspired color bible, which became a visual blueprint for everyone involved.

Having worked on character designs at Aardman, Predal brought the influence of stop motion, not just with the distinctive movement but also in capturing the warmth and charm of the medium. "With Aurélien Predal's understanding of these aesthetics, we wanted to explore a more tactile look that would bring a warmer and more tangible aspect to the CG and lean much closer to stop-motion animation," says Chabat. "The idea was to feel that we could almost touch these characters. The same went for the sets, which had to work in harmony with the characters while also remaining as faithful as possible to Uderzo's drawings."

In terms of a graphical style, Chabat and Joubert wanted to pay homage to the golden age of Asterix, which, for them, is situated between *Asterix the Gladiator* (1964) and *Asterix at the Olympic Games* (1968). Joubert explains: "It was during this period that the characters

**"AH, THE SMELL OF ADVENTURE IN THE MORNING!"**

***Asterix and the Big Fight***

(first published in *Pilote* magazine, 1964)





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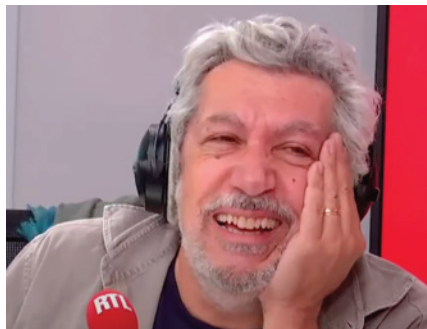
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really took on their definitive form (even if they continued to evolve afterward), and Uderzo, graphically, dared to experiment further, such as [by] eliminating the background to keep only a colored card behind the characters. So, we decided to emulate this idea in some sequences of the series, as well as integrating splashes of onomatopoeia.”



**“We wanted to explore a more tactile look that would bring a warmer and more tangible aspect to the CG and lean much closer to stop-motion animation ...”**  
CO-DIRECTOR ALAN CHABAT

And it works ... as the typography and sound effects POP! and the action explodes — *TCHRAÂÂÂC!* — the flourishes immediately add those familiar imperfections we have become used to via the *Spider-Verse* movies that Predal did design work on. It’s all there, even down to the iconic magic potion, which presented its own challenges as the series tweaks Getafix’s original “recipe.” As Joubert explains, “Aurélien was intrigued by a printing flaw in the first editions of the albums where the primary printing colors (cyan, magenta and yellow) were not perfectly aligned and so became the basis of the look for the magic potion as well as the visual effect surrounding the characters when they drink it.”

### Model Behavior

The characters are built as 3D models in ZBrush. With constant reference via an overlay for accuracy, the original character designers help set the volume while keyframe moments from the original scripts are also used to test the range of movement, matching specific angles from a library of poses. Once the models are built, they are sent to rigging and tested for any imperfections that may arise, specifically where the limbs are bent and may reveal holes or bumps.

A toing and froing occurs between 3D modelers and riggers (who literally sit next to each other), a process that can take several months for a main character, with Asterix alone going through over 100 variations. Adobe Substance is used to digitally paint the 3D models — each texture created by a separate artist who uses material references — which can take another three weeks to two months per character. It is here where you can see the detail of the leather and fabrics along with a fuzziness to the skin.

Of course, all of this comes to life once it is lit (shot by shot) in 3ds Max, the software that is also used to animate the series. Out of complete darkness, the lighting and rendering are set up as multiple sources, starting with the sun and then tweaking with digital reflectors before rendering in Chaos V-Ray for the art directors to check over.

### Legacy and Lineage

Another individual crucial to the production is animation director and supervisor Kristof Serrand, an animation veteran who has worked on practically all of DreamWorks’ animated output since *The Prince of Egypt* and the 2D-animated Asterix movies, which includes the original *Asterix and the Big Fight* adaptation released in 1989. This lineage with both the characters and major studios not only runs



through Serrand and Predal but also through the directors themselves, with Chabat having worked on the live-action

*Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra* (2002), while Joubert — having worked as a stop-motion animator on Aardman’s *Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005) — also worked as an animator at DreamWorks since its earliest movies.

As TAT’s co-CEO David Alaux mentions, “Everyone stepped up, learning from the best in town ... In some ways, it was like going back to school.”



### Co-director Fabrice Joubert

The project came about when Chabat wrote a treatment of *The Big Fight* for fun. “Writing around the Asterix universe is always a pleasure for me. The publishers, Hachette, heard about the treatment and asked if they could read it, and they loved it.”

Having already written and directed a live-action Asterix movie, he was reluctant to repeat himself, so he discussed the possibility of producing an animated movie. “Dominique Bazay, director for original animation at Netflix, suggested that it absolutely could be [animated], but if the story needed another format, it was totally OK to expand into a miniseries. And here we have it,” Chabat concludes. ■

***Asterix & Obelix: The Big Fight* is currently streaming on Netflix worldwide (since April 30).**



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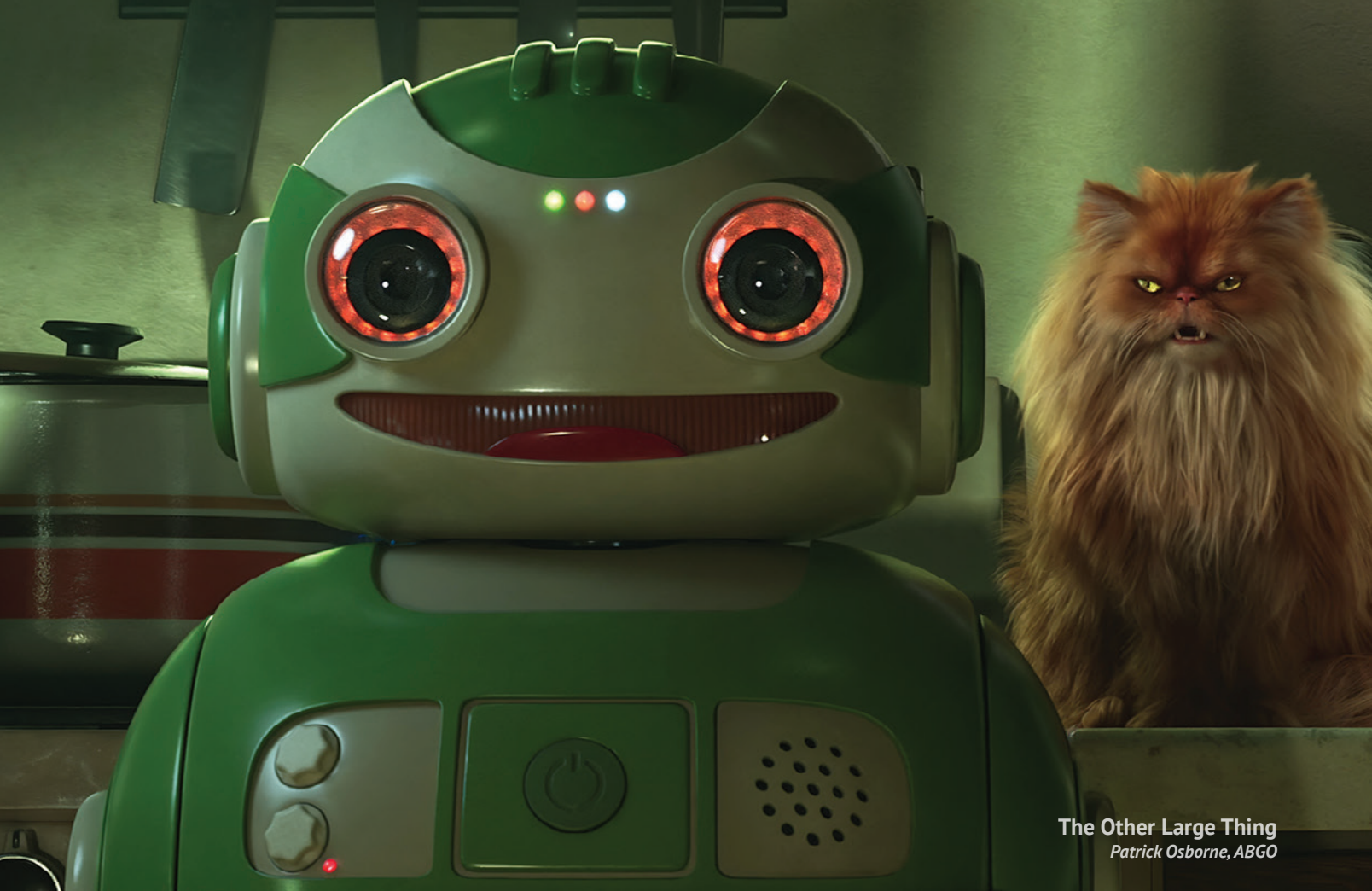
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The Other Large Thing  
*Patrick Osborne, ABGO*



400 Boys  
*Robert Valley, Passion Pictures*





TV/STREAMING

# MORE ADVENTURES IN MIND-EXPANDING SCI-FI

Netflix's acclaimed *Love, Death + Robots* anthology is back with 10 new eye-popping episodes.

By Jeff Spry

**N**etflix's *Love, Death + Robots* — the five-time Emmy-winning animated anthology series that showcases an unrestricted flow of mature, mind-mas-saging sci-fi, fantasy and horror shorts — has returned for a fourth season of raw imagination. This modern heir apparent to the 1981 movie *Heavy Metal* is an experimental kitchen constantly cooking up every conceivable flavor in the art of animation. Created and executive produced by Tim Miller and David Fincher, with Jennifer Yuh Nelson aboard as supervising director, *Love, Death + Robots* is a fever dream of extraordinary stories adapted by a team of unrivaled talent that delivers one gem after another.

Chatting with Miller, Nelson and famed animator Robert Valley, one is immediately reminded of how, since 2019, this show has evolved into a signature brand of delightfully demented, hardcore animated outings:

***Love, Death + Robots* is widely embraced by legions of fans and animation enthusiasts. How have you kept steady hands on the creative wheel to keep the show on course through these four seasons and what was your core vision?**

**Miller:** I wanted to do a *Heavy Metal* show because it influenced me heavily as a kid, because I wanted to be an animator, but I didn't want to animate Yogi Bear on Hanna-Barbera cartoons. *Heavy Metal* gave me hope

that you could find a place in animation that could tell adult stories with adult themes. It was *Heavy Metal* and *Fritz the Cat* and midnight screenings at the mall with my friends, and it was amazing. So I'm trying to reinvent that. Fincher and I pitched, with Kevin Eastman, who owned *Heavy Metal* magazine, a hundred versions of this movie with Guillermo del Toro and Jim Cameron and Zack Snyder. I was a drag on the ticket, but I was there, and we just couldn't sell it. Eventually, Fincher said, "F— it, let's just do it on Netflix and call it something else," and *Love, Death + Robots* was born.

**Jennifer directed the unsettling sci-fi episode *Spider Rose*, which has a distinctly cyberpunk-meets-space opera flair. Its gruesome ending was changed from Bruce Sterling's 1982 short story that it was based on. How was that decision made?**

**Miller:** I'm a bit slavish to the original, as Jen and Robert will tell you. I'm almost always fighting for what was the author's original intent. Which doesn't mean it's not better the other way; it's just harder for me to unstick it.

**Nelson:** We do try to be true to the short story. I think that's one of the guiding principles of the show and why the stories are so good, because they're based on really great stories. It wasn't a light thing to do to change the ending. I actually did do the other version at some point, and it was a hard swap. I think something changes when you visualize it. When you write it, it's a little bit more on

your mind. When you see it, it's far more of a thing. A similar thing we did on *Pop Squad*. We had kids being killed multiple times, and you can't show that. So we had to figure how to do things in a way that reads visually. In this particular one, you're supposed to, over 12 minutes, empathize with something and then watch someone kill it on screen and eat it! And that was a really hard bridge to cross. I felt it was a way you could get my favorite shot in the short when you see the conflict on Nosey's face when he's about to do what he's going to do. I felt I was still in the *Love, Death + Robots* world in that you don't have happy things, but it kept it from being something so horrific that people would say, "Nope."

**Valley:** I think I'm getting ready to eat my son. I'm getting to that point. He's 14.

**Miller:** That's probably the age when they taste best.

**Robert, the striking segment you directed is *400 Boys*. It's a postapocalyptic gangland tale based on *Half-Life* creator Marc Laidlaw's 1983 short story in *Omni* magazine. It feels a bit like *A Clockwork Orange* with giant babies and with stylistic and thematic nods to *The Warriors*. Did Walter Hill's 1979 classic also influence this piece?**

**Valley:** Yeah, I am totally a fan of that film. I've seen it before all these streaming platforms, when they'd show it on TV occasionally, and I always made time to watch it. So I read the short story, *400 Boys*, and to me there really





was a lot of *The Warriors* influence in there. I mentioned that to Tim, and that seems to be agreeable.

I was also looking specifically at a movie called *City of God*; it's a Brazilian film. There's so much in that film that I just kept looking at it for reference. The warm colors, the grittiness of it, the way the director dealt with multiple characters. I thought there were a lot of little lessons I was trying to learn from that because there's definitely a lot of characters in *400 Boys*. Giving each character the same amount of importance is what I wanted, more than just little sidekicks. **How did you decide upon that striking angular shape language and saturated color palette for *400 Boys*?**

**Valley:** This cocktail that makes the stylistic look of the animation has been brewing for a long time and has to do with the people that I've worked with. So, specifically, that's Jamie Hewlett from Gorillaz and Peter Chung, the *Aeon Flux* guy. One of them is about stylistic simplicity and



JENNIFER YUH NELSON



TIM MILLER

graphicness. That's Jamie Hewlett. Peter Chung is more like total detail, precision, with manga influences. We've been cobbling together this crew that started with *Zima Blue*, and we've done about six productions since then. We've been adding people and stylistically adding some new wrinkles to our little bag of tricks to push things a little bit further. On this production, I think we did end up biting off a little bit more than we can chew.

**The David Fincher-directed episode, *Don't Stop*, features The Red Hot Chili Peppers doing a hilarious live performance in mar-**

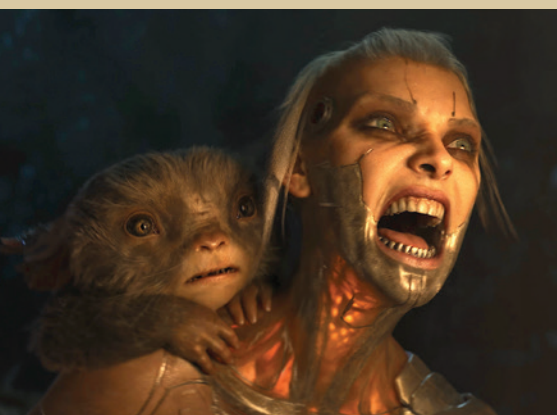
**ionette form. How did that come together?**

**Miller:** It was as simple as me calling David and saying, "Dude, you need to do an episode for this season. We need some high-powered director talent." And I told him I wanted him to do a music video. He said, "OK I'm going to do The Red Hot Chili Peppers as puppets, *Team America*-style." It was that quick, because he had the idea in his head and it had been kicking around forever. My secret agenda was to restrain him by giving him a song, because it could only be so long and it couldn't go over. And the rest sort of came from him and the team at Blur Studio.

**Nelson:** The band was fantastic, and during the whole mo-cap session they brought their own instruments. Those are very amazingly high-quality, priceless things that they brought to be scanned so they could make it accurate. And they just had a great time. Since they're friends, I think they brought their A-game too, to make sure we had all the motions that we needed.

**Miller:** I think it's great that those guys have so much trust in David. There was no question of, "Are you sure this is a good idea?" They were just so down with it. I have no idea if David showed them any of the work-in-progress stuff because it came together rather quickly. David is so precise, sometimes you have to decode his critiques because they're written in haiku form. But once you understand it, they're very precise and the episode is f—ing beautiful. ■

**All four seasons of *Love, Death + Robots* are currently streaming on Netflix.**



Spider Rose

Jennifer Yuh Nelson, Blur Studio



The Screaming of the Tryannosaur

Tim Miller, Blur Studio



For He Can Creep

Emily Dean, Polygon Pictures



How Zeke Got Religion

Diego Porral, Titmouse





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TV/STREAMING

# Fish Tale

Producer Barney Goodland looks back at the making of Magic Light Pictures' Annecy-nominated special about a very gifted fish named Tiddler.



Ever since Michael Rose and Martin Pope first collaborated on an adaptation of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's book *The Gruffalo* back in 2009, the duo's Magic Light Pictures has brought 15 top-notch specials and series to animated life. Last Christmas, they followed up their long string of award-winning and crowd-pleasing titles (which include *Room on the Broom*, *Revolting Rhymes*, *Zog*, *The Snail and the Whale* and *Tabby McTat*) with yet another Donaldson-Scheffler

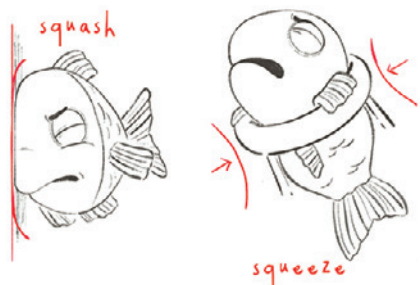
book adaptation, *Tiddler*. An audience of 7.3 million tuned in to watch the special when it premiered on BBC One and BBC iPlayer in December. In fact, the project scored the highest audience share for a Magic Light Pictures special since *The Gruffalo*.

"The *Tiddler* book has been a firm favorite at Magic Light for years because of Julia Donaldson's charming celebration of storytelling and Axel Scheffler's vibrant illustrations set in an wonderful underwater world," says producer Barney Goodland, whose credits also include *Tabby McTat*, *The Smeds and the Smoes*, *Zog and the Flying Doctors* and *The Snail and the Whale*. "Tiddler is also a brilliant character — a real performer with a great imagination. We also loved that he is a school-age fish. It meant we could tell a story with young characters at its heart, which could speak to young viewers directly and they could recognize themselves in it."

**Swimming with Class:** Produced by Barney Goodland and Martin Pope, *Tiddler* is the 12th adaptation of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler books by U.K.'s Magic Light Pictures. It features the voices of Hannah Waddingham, Lolly Adefope, Jayde Adams and Rob Brydon.

## A Great Catch

*Tiddler*, which is directed by Andy Martin and Alex Bain and narrated by Hannah Waddingham, centers on a small fish with a big imagination who is swept away from his school one day. Soon, he comes to realize that his tall tales might be the key to finding his way back home to his friends and family. "Everything he sees inspires his imagination to create a story, but he ends up putting himself in grave danger," says Goodland. "Eventually, his journey to safety teaches him that he doesn't need to change who he is to impress others and that he already had everything he





needed. The combination of this storyline with a character as engaging, energetic and creative as Tiddler was a real treat to work with.”

Goodland adds that it was especially rewarding to work on the balance between the story’s real world and the world of Tiddler’s imagination. “Exploring the balance was exciting from a design point of view, and making sure we got the transitions right felt like a key to exploring his story successfully,” he notes.

The producer says he and the team faced the challenge of unlocking Donaldson and Scheffler’s work and expanding it into a 25-minute special while retaining what people love and hold dear about the book.

“For Tiddler, that meant looking at why he tells stories and led to us thinking about the joys of storytelling, the relationships it creates and the excitement of finding and delivering for an audience,” he explains. “From a technical point of view, doing anything with water in animation is always difficult, but with fish we also had characters who had to show everything in their faces. This posed a serious challenge to the animation team, but they really rose to it. I think the emotional performances they’ve created are phenomenal. They have such skill and have done it so subtly. The same has to be said for the whole crew, who successfully created an underwater world that welcomes the viewer.”

From treatment and scripting to delivery to the BBC, the project took close to two years to complete. “We made the film using a feature pipeline, giving the storytelling and creatives the time we think is needed to create something special,” says Goodland. “Magic Light Pictures produced the film with Red Star, a very talented studio based in Sheffield, U.K., providing animation services. Assets and additional animation were provided by Triggerfish Animation Studios in Cape Town, South Africa. They used Maya, Animbot, Fusion, Houdini, Photoshop and Arnold to produce the animation.”

The special’s style harkens back to their very first Donaldson-Scheffler adaptation, *The Gruffalo*. “In the 11 previous adaptations we’ve produced of Julia and Axel’s books, we’ve always wanted to retain that original style, because it maintains the connection to the original work and what the audience



expects,” says Goodland. “The stories are all different and take place in different worlds, but we like to think they’re all part of the same universe and viewers can move between them seamlessly.”

Goodland says the animation goes hand in hand with the storytelling. “We let the story and any source material inspire the style,” he notes. “We’ve produced live-action projects, as well other animated specials like Roald Dahl’s *Revolution Rhymes* and live-action and animation hybrids like *The Velveteen Rabbit* all with different techniques and styles. It’s the storytelling that’s fundamental to Magic Light and then letting that drive the technique.”

Because the studio’s animated specials have become regular features of the holiday season in the U.K., Magic Light was able to easily get top voice talent to sign on to the project. “We

talent they present.”

He adds, “Hannah Waddingham was our dream narrator for *Tiddler*, and her performance is sublime, perfectly engaging the audience and heightening the drama. With Karen and Emily, we also identified early on that the school fish had to be played by children. It was the only way Tiddler’s character would feel genuine. Finding our two young actors presented Karen and Emily with a challenge, but in Reuben Kirby (Tiddler) and Theo Fraser (Johnny Dory) they found two absolute stars who gave performances with great energy and vulnerability.”

### On a Grand Scale

Goodland says that 2025 is a challenging time for animation worldwide.

“The costs of production remain very high, and there is a lot of competition for audience attention,” he says. “Of course, competition can make things harder, but it can also lead to a greater commitment to quality and good storytelling, which we welcome. I do think there’s lots to be excited by. Audience awareness and engagement with animation as a storytelling technique continues to widen. In the U.K., we’re seeing signs of the industry getting more recognition and potential opportunities for growth opening up. There’s recently been an uplift to the tax credit and lobbying is ongoing for more support to be put in place.



**“In the 11 previous adaptations we’ve produced of Julia and Axel’s books, we’ve always wanted to retain that original style, because it maintains the connection to the original work and what the audience expect.”**

**TIDDLER PRODUCER BARNEY GOODLAND**

often find that actors are keen to work with us as they’ve enjoyed previous films with their children or grandchildren,” says the producer. “Also, we have tremendous casting agents in Karen Lindsay-Stewart and Emily Jacobs, who always recommend great voices. Martin Pope (producer and co-founder of Magic Light) and I worked out a brief with the directors about the characters’ personalities and their place in the world we’re creating. Karen and Emily then used this to put together their suggestions, and we’re always amazed by the incredible

There’s plenty to do, but I think these things are encouraging.”

He says he hopes audiences and young families take the message of *Tiddler* to heart and keep doing things that make them happy without worrying about the opinion of others. “Storytelling is marvelous, and if nothing else, it’s a way to have a fun dance with penguins, as long as you watch out for the fishermen!” ■

***Tiddler* will debut on Apple TV+ and Prime Video in the U.S. and the U.K. on June 10.**





# FLASHBACK!

## HAPPY 30TH BIRTHDAY TO WHAT A CARTOON!

The man behind Cartoon Network's influential animation incubator looks back at the creation of the anthology series in 1995.

By Fred Seibert

**T**hirty years ago, *What A Cartoon!* was my attempt to rekindle the magic of the cartoons I loved as a kid, by giving animated filmmakers the creative reins and trusting their instincts. Against the odds, it sparked a wave of originality that launched careers and helped define a new era in TV animation. For those of us who were there, it was a wild ride; for younger creators, I hope this look-back story reminds you what's possible when artists lead.

As a kid, cartoons energized me before I even knew what that inspiration would mean to my life.

Bugs Bunny, Huckleberry Hound and The Flintstones were my favorites. Later, rock 'n' roll took over and changed where I was going (I was a science and math kid), but I never imagined it would be cartoons that ultimately dominated. And now it's been 30 years since I had the chance to help midwife *What a Cartoon!* and the creations that would galvanize a generation.

After leaving MTV — where I was the original creative director and a co-founder — my partner, Alan Goodman, and I started the world's first media-branding agency. In 1984, Nickelodeon became our first network client, and we took the channel from worst to first in the ratings in just six months. One tactic was commissioning dozens of wildly inventive network identifications from small indie animation studios. Somehow, that led Nick to ask me how to make its first original cartoons.

### From IDs to Toons

We'd only produced 10-second IDs, and all I really knew about cartoons was what I loved as a kid. Providentially, I'd just read Leonard Maltin and Jerry Beck's *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*.

"Do what they did when cartoons were great," I told the Nickelodeon team. "Make shorts, one at a time. If they're good, make more." Whew! Pulled that one out of my butt.

But the programmers thought I meant, "Make pilots."

The truth is that I hate pilots. They exist for executives to pull apart and revise endlessly. I wanted shorts, not pilots, put on the air exactly as the creator intended, with no notes or changes. Nick made pilots anyway. It got *Rugrats*, *Doug* and *Ren & Stimpy* — huge successes. What did I know? I was still annoyed.

Eventually, Alan and I closed our company. In 1992, Ted Turner and Scott Sassa hired me to run Hanna-Barbera Cartoons, soon to be the backbone of the new Cartoon Network.

Hanna-Barbera's last big hit had been *The Smurfs* a decade earlier. I knew nothing about making cartoons (or, for that matter, any TV shows), but I still had the shorts idea.

Ted didn't like it. More for business reasons than creative ones — a story for another day — but I was told to just make some series. I

did, and they bombed. With our budget shot, I went back to the well.

"With \$10 million, I can find new talent to create dozens of new characters." The plan: 48 shorts.

"You just failed twice. Why should we let you try again?"

"If we do something 48 times, don't you think we'll get it right at least once?"

Besides, cable operators were looking for original programming and loved media buzz. With shorts, Cartoon Network could promote "new shows" weekly for at least two years. And, not for nothing, great shorts had fueled the cartoon industry for a century; we'd be the first in decades to do them commercially.

Ted, always the entrepreneurial risk-taker, went for it, and *What a Cartoon!* was born.

The production team centered on my first animation mentor, Buzz Potamkin, and the young-at-heart veteran producer Larry Huber. My management partner, Jed Simmons, figured out how to pry the money out of our parent company. (Plus, anyone else at H&B





who didn't think I was crazy.)

I spent two years talking to anyone in the animation industry who would listen. Mainly, the artists who got into the business to make cartoons, not animated sitcoms or half-hour toy commercials, but amazing cartoons like the ones that made them fall in love with the medium.

From *Of Mice and Magic*, and from listening to Joe and Bill talk about their creations, I realized that the most unique voices in animation came from the artists themselves. That may sound obvious, but the conventional wisdom I've been hearing for 30 years is, "Artists can't write." My comeback: "Most writers can't write either. They can only type."

I made it my mission to find artists who could "write." The rest of the industry wasn't interested in them, which gave Hanna-Barbera a totally open field.

I wanted *What a Cartoon!* to be as "golden age" as possible. We wanted new voices from around the world to speak to new generations of fans. And "golden age" meant storyboard pitches only — no scripts. You can imagine that didn't go over too well in some circles.

We put out press releases and waited. Oh boy! Massive mailbags of storyboards poured in. Our estimate: over 5,000 submissions during the three years of production.

The presentation room was packed. I was the least-experienced person there, so I made sure the pitchers — some new, some veteran artists — had an educated audience: H&B production staff, Cartoon Network folks like programmer Mike Lazzo and then-President Betty Cohen — probably about 20 people per session.

Buzz and Larry brought in legends like Ralph

Bakshi and Bruno Bozzetto (yes, they had to pitch too!), which got *What a Cartoon!* some attention. And many young folks already working on our shows lined up to take part in what I hoped would be a new golden era.

We cast the net wide. The goal: introduce Cartoon Network viewers to original cartoons that reflected the contemporary world, not just reheated versions of the past. The classic stuff would be everywhere soon, thanks to channel expansion. Why try to imitate it?

### The Search for Original Voices

What we needed were original voices and fresh perspectives; they'd create the cartoons the audience had been waiting for.

It was thrilling to hear the pitches. Some were good, some not, and some were great. I could tell by the looks on everyone's faces: We were living through something special.

Shorts hadn't been mainstream since the '60s. The response made it clear: The time had come again.

Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera each made shorts for the program. So did veterans like Jerry Eisenberg, Don Jurwich and Robert Alvarez. (You can find a full list on Wikipedia.) But the younger generation brought the most energy — and the biggest success stories.

Genndy Tartakovsky (*Dexter's Laboratory*) and Craig McCracken (*The Powerpuff Girls*) came from our *2 Stupid Dogs* production. Van Partible (*Johnny Bravo*) had just graduated college. David Feiss (*Cow & Chicken*) had been

**'I spent two years talking to anyone in the animation industry who would listen. Mainly, the artists who got into the business to make cartoons, not animated sitcoms or half-hour toy commercials, but amazing cartoons like the ones that made them fall in love with the medium.'**

FRED SEIBERT

storyboarding on *Super Secret Secret Squirrel*. John Dilworth (*Courage the Cowardly Dog*) was a wild card from the New York indie scene.

And the influence didn't stop there. Creators like Butch Hartman (*The Fairly OddParents*, *Danny Phantom*), Rob Renzetti (*My Life as a Teenage Robot*) and Seth MacFarlane (*Family Guy*) also got their springboard with *What a Cartoon!*

Looking back on the 48 shorts we produced, every creator brought passion and purpose. You could feel how motivated they were to make their mark in an industry that had overlooked many of them for so long.

And somehow, we cracked the door open, just like I'd hoped. A new golden age was here! ■

Fred Seibert is an animation producer and media entrepreneur, known for founding Frederator, co-founding MTV and producing hit shows such as *Adventure Time*, *Castlevania* and *The Fairly OddParents*. He's an Emmy winner and the first Tumblr investor. Fred entered the *Animation Magazine* Hall of Fame in 2017 and the Emmy Gold Circle in 2023.







# RABBIT DREAMS



Apple TV+'s new preschool show *Not a Box* delivers a sweetly animated treat that invites young viewers to use their imagination.

By Ramin Zahed

Oh, the places Riley the bunny will go — and take young viewers along with her this month! Riley is the clever, imaginative star of the new animated series *Not a Box*, which premieres on Apple TV+ in June. The lovingly crafted show, which is based on the award-winning book by Antoinette Portis, follows the adventures of Riley as she embarks on incredible adventures through limitless environments, characters and encounters. The series' head writer and showrunner, Michael Rabb, was kind enough to tell us a little more about Riley's world.

Rabb was first introduced to the book when it was in development at Silver Creek Falls Entertainment. "[The studio] told me they were trying to find a unique way to turn the book into a preschool TV series," he recalls. "I must have read the book a hundred times, and I carried it with me everywhere. One day while I was walking with my six-year-old niece, she said she wanted to tell me a story. Listening to the way she made up characters and situations on the fly, the

way she changed her mind about certain details and then changed them back again, gave me the inspiration to create a show that told stories in the same way a six-year old would tell a story. Just Imperfectly perfect!"

## Pure Imagination

Rabb, who has written for numerous animated shows over the past two decades (including *Berenstain Bears*, *Word World*, *Handy Manny*, *Captain Jake and the Never Land Pirates* and *Doc McStuffins*), says he loves that anything Riley imagines can come true. "It's her pure and unfiltered imagination that she uses to create all kinds of new friends, new places to visit and new adventures," he mentions. "She can literally go anywhere and do anything. All she has to do is imagine it. But it's also the love she feels for the characters she imagines to life. From a sea monster named Pizza to a surfing mountain goat named Ramsey, Riley feels a very special bond with each and every one of them."

The show's distinctive visual style was created by Siri Melchior (*Rita and Crocodile, Lili*) a BAFTA-nominated Danish animator and

**Bunny Hops:** Based on the award-winning book by Antoinette Portis, *Not a Box* follows the entertaining adventures of Riley the rabbit, who allows her imagination to take her to new places.

children's book illustrator best known for her vibrant, playful and handcrafted style. "What really sets this show apart is its handmade look, almost as if the characters, scenic backgrounds and props were sketched, painted and then cut out," notes Rabb. "I compare it to a children's book that comes to life."

*Not a Box* was in development for about a year, during which Rabb and the team (which includes exec producers Dete Meserve, Angus Wall, Linda Carlson and Harry Lowell) honed in on who Riley was and what kind stories she wanted to tell. Once they got past the development stage, the show was in active production for about two years. The animation was done by award-winning U.K. studio Passion Animation. The voices were cast and recorded in and around Vancouver. The show had four staff writers (including Rabb), but the production was also able to get a dozen or more freelance writers





who contributed story ideas or scripts to the series.

Of course, like every animated show ever created, there were challenges along the way! "The project was far more challenging than I had planned for," admits Rabb. "Replicating the storytelling mind of a six-year old isn't easy — it's the opposite. We weren't just inventing stories that sounded like kids made them up; we were trying to capture how kids actually think, talk and play. That meant watching hours of real children interacting without adult interference, listening to how their stories unfold naturally. Our writers' room became a daily brainstorm of hundreds of ideas, just to find that one spark that felt truly authentic to the character's voice!"

### Collaboration & Empathy

Now that the show is ready to entertain young viewers around the world, Rabb hopes they will realize how powerful their imagination can be. "Riley doesn't wait for the perfect toy or the perfect moment, she creates entire worlds out of an ordinary cardboard box," says the veteran writer-producer. "That kind

of creativity, that confidence to turn 'nothing' into 'something incredible,' is what we want to nurture in kids. We also hope viewers see the value of friendship and collaboration. Riley's stories might start in her mind, but it's her friends who help bring them to life, each adding their own ideas and energy. The show celebrates the idea that play is not just fun. It's where kids learn problem-solving, empathy and how to express themselves. If Riley inspires just one child to look at a plain old box and say, 'This could be anything!' then we've done our job!"

Rabb leaves us with a bit of advice for those who would like to write and create shows for young audiences. "It's a wild ride for sure, and there's no single path to take, but if I had to offer one piece of advice, it would be to stay curious and try to find new

and different ways to tell stories," he says. "An old college professor of mine once told me that there are no new stories to tell, however the world has yet to hear your story. This business is also very unpredictable, and



**"Replicating the storytelling mind of a 6-year-old isn't easy — it's the opposite. We weren't just inventing stories that sounded like kids made them up; we were trying to capture how kids actually think, talk and play."**

SHOWRUNNER/HEAD WRITER MICHAEL RABB

I've seen it go up and down over the years. But I've learned that it's a business built on relationships. Reach out, talk to people who've had success in the industry, connect with other writers and artists. The people you meet early in your career may become collaborators or champions down the line!" ■

**Not a Box premieres on Apple TV+ on June 13.**



# A JOURNEY ACROSS PLATFORMS

**PATRICK MCCARTHY INTRODUCES US TO HIS COMPANY PARALAND REALMS AND THE WORK THEY'RE DOING TO CREATE A FANTASY UNIVERSE.**

Patrick McCarthy has made it his life's pursuit to create a single fantasy world that lives across a multitude of platforms. "Thirteen-year-old me was obsessed with franchises like Star Wars and Pokémon, and I wished more stories would let you dive into their world the way those franchises did," he says.

That's why the talented artist and writer has created a fantasy metaverse that features an animated series, combining serious world building with silly comedy, a VR game that immerses gamers into a sport of magic monster fighting, and a collectible toy game that pushes players to min/mix figurines in an "Amiibo meets chess" table-top game.

## It All Starts with the Show

Paraland is about a trio of heroes who have to harness the power of the gods to defeat an undead warlord

that they... kind of accidentally resurrected.

But, the real fun is all the adventures they go on along the way to keep the great nation of Paraland safe. They uncover ancient secrets, fight cosmic creatures, and reach new levels of strength on the path to fulfill their destiny as the gods chosen leaders.

Most animated comedies focus solely on the jokes, so why is Paraland focused on blending it with world-building? McCarthy responds, "The true fun of a fantasy is *exploring* the world. Getting to laugh along the way is an added bonus." He may be onto something. Just the trailer alone for the show netted multiple festival selections and awards – including Best Animation and Best Music!

**Patrick McCarthy**, has a history of doing things *differently*. He moved out to Los Angeles as a comedian, then taught himself how to animate.



He then created *Spec Animations* as a way to showcase his ability to write *and* animate. And, they worked! Every one he made went viral and amassed millions of views! He even created an original animated *Game of Thrones* prequel (*Doom of Valyria*) that garnered a 95% approval rating from fans.

However, success didn't happen overnight. Many of these accomplishments came while he was



The Toy Game as seen in episode 106

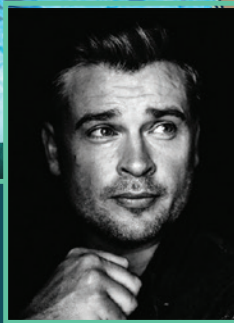


The VR game as seen in episode 104





**Arif Zahir**  
as Grombul



**Tom Welling**  
as King Jim



**Summer Bishil**  
as Queen Fula

still parking cars to make a living. Luckily for Patrick, his unconventional path into animation paid off, and he has been working as a Storyboard Artist for *Family Guy* for over five years now!

Patrick has also been hard at work building a team to bring *Paraland* to life – including recruiting accomplished writers who have worked on great shows like *WandaVision* and *My Adventures with Superman*, to even casting actors that align with the characters of the show: The impressive voice cast includes:

**Arif Zahir**, who voices Cleveland on *Family Guy*, got the job trolling gamers online. And, he brings that quick wit to Grombul the sharp-tongued troll.

**Tom Welling**, who played Clark

Kent on the long-running series *Smallville*, voices King Jim a superhero of Paraland with no ability to relax.

And, **Summer Bishil**, who played Margo on the fantasy series *The Magicians*, brings that magical spark to the elven sorceress Queen Fula.

Even though Patrick has a knack for creating viral videos, he took nothing for granted as he brings in three actors that have a social media presence surpassing 9 million followers!

We asked McCarthy how he thinks this project will stand out in a saturated market. “Well, I think fans of fantasy are really generous,” he says. “They’ll give any entry into the genre a shot, and so we want to respect their time and deliver them as much entertainment with the time

they give us. All while building upon the great fantasy worlds of the past and creating something new born out of our deep love for the genre.”

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You can find out more about Paraland Realms, and its mission at:

[www.paralandrealms.com](http://www.paralandrealms.com)

Or engage with them on social media:

@paralandrealms on IG and TikTok

r/paraland on Reddit as well!

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PARALAND  
REALMS





# Suburbia Meets Surreal in Ground-Breaking New Australian Series



A landmark Australian television series with a unique “digitally handmade” aesthetic will be one to watch when the animation market gets an early look at the show at the Annecy market this month.

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* is an adaptation of Shaun Tan’s illustrated anthology of the same name, a multi-award-winning book which has been translated in 28 territories across the world.

The 10 x 22-minute series has been produced by an incredible team of Australian creatives: Shaun as creative director and producer Sophie Byrne from Highly Spirited, whose partnership won them an Academy Award for their animated short film *The Lost Thing*, in collaboration with executive producer Barbara Stephen and producer Alexia Gates-Foale from Flying Bark Productions — the powerhouse animation studio behind projects including *100% Wolf* and the Emmy Award-winning *Moon Girl and the Devil Dinosaur*.

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* begins when ‘almost thirteen-year-old’ Klara and her six-year-old brother Pim move to Outer Suburbia with their newly single mother Lucy. The siblings’ summer holiday turns into a series of unexpected and surreal adventures, with the family encountering weird and

miraculous phenomena as they adapt to their new reality. The mundanity of suburban life and an unremarkable summer vacation are blended with otherworldly and dreamlike adventures.

“Shaun has such a distinct and celebrated voice and tone,” says producer Sophie Byrne. “The way he blends accessible surrealist elements and magic realism in his art and text with ideas and concepts that are grounded and relatable seem to resonate deeply with his audiences. I believe this series will be no different and is bound to captivate and invite conversation and repeat viewing by all audiences – kids, family and all in between.”

“I think all good fiction is necessarily a mix of fantasy and reality. Even the most straightforward story needs to be a little weird to be interesting,” says Shaun Tan.

Director Noel Cleary and his team have created a stunning recreation of the world established in the internationally acclaimed anthology, using cutting-edge CGI animation with a handcrafted stop-motion look and feel.

“We built the show’s style around a tactile ‘digitally handmade’ aesthetic, where the assets used — including characters, locations, props, and vfx — look like they were made in the “real world” by stop-motion artists,”

says Noel.

He adds, “We leaned into adding imperfections, playing with the scale of miniatures in modelling and design, emulating different surface properties such as cloth, clay, and wood, then using realistic lighting, cameras and compositing tools so that our world looks photographed rather than rendered.”

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* has been created for a family audience with co-viewing in mind. “The core themes of the series have multi-generational appeal: our main characters deal with their parents breaking up, loneliness, sibling rivalry, making new friends, overcoming insecurities — all things which audiences may have experienced at one time or another,” says producer Alexia Gates-Foale.

## Magical Realism for the Family

The series is designed to make audiences think, reflect and connect. “Shaun’s books are popular with children and families as they pose interesting moral and philosophical questions, without being prescriptive, encouraging more thought and discussion on the perceived meanings of his work,” says Noel. “The series aims to continue this form of storytelling and delivers magic

realism in a form that we hope resonates well with television audiences.”

“It may be an odd thing to say, but I hope audiences will be puzzled,” says Shaun. “Not confused or bewildered, but also not entirely understanding what, how or why things are happening in the story the way they do. I’ve never read a single good poem, listened to a great song or watched a terrific film that I can say I’ve fully understood. I love them because the meaning remains a little elusive.”



Shaun Tan

“We not only had a hugely passionate, like-minded creative team in Flying Bark and our writers, but also all of our stakeholders — the ACTF, ABC, BYUtv, Screen Australia and Screen West — shared that passion and desire to produce something truly special,” says Sophie. “I think we have produced a series with a unique point of difference in kids programming that is sophisticated and intelligent narratively, from each episode’s individual surrealist encounter to the standout animation and ‘look’ and lighting and rendering that Noel and the team at Flying Bark has produced.

“I believe this series looks and plays like nothing that has ever been produced in this space in Australia before,” she concludes.

**The complete (10 x 22) series of *Tales from Outer Suburbia* will be available later in 2025. The Australian Children’s Television Foundation ([actf.com.au](http://actf.com.au)) will distribute the show.**





Australian Children's Television Foundation Presents

# tales from Outer suburbia



Screening at Anney

*Highly Spirited*



ABC

byu  
tv



Screen  
Australia



Screen  
Australia

SIAMCSC



ACTF



True and the Rainbow Kingdom



PAW Patrol

Mecha Builders



Justin Time

PAW Patrol: The Mighty Movie







## MILESTONES

# Northern Star Continues to Shine

**Toronto-based Guru Studio celebrates 25 years of memorable toons and quality productions.**

**I**t's been 25 years since animation veteran Frank Falcone opened the doors of his prolific Toronto-based Guru Studio. Best known for children's properties such as *PAW Patrol*, *True and the Rainbow Kingdom*, *Justin Time*, *Abby Hatcher*, *Mecha Builders* and *Big Blue*, the studio has been a consistent player in the ever-changing world of 2D and CG animation for the past two decades. Falcone, the studio's founder, president and creative director, and a good friend of *Animation Magazine* throughout the years, was kind enough to answer a few of our questions about his company on this special occasion.

**What were your original goals for starting Guru and how have they changed and evolved through the years?**

Truth be told, I did not have a burning desire to run my own shop. Back in the late 1990s, I had offers to go work at all the major studios in the U.S.A. But after the interviews, none of the projects or the shops felt compelling.

In addition, the prospect of immigrating to the U.S. felt daunting, after my parents had journeyed from their home in Italy to Australia for 15 years and then to Canada. I thought I'd see if I could make a go of it by staying put here in Toronto and hoping that my reputation as an award-winning broadcast commercial director focused on character animation and storytelling would be enough to sustain a small business with a unique focus at a time when shops did flying logos, VFX, title graphics and anything else to keep their businesses alive.

People told me the focus on character animation would not be enough, but 25 years later it seems to have been a good bet.

**What would you say defines a great Guru show?**

Intent. We always like to say "intent before content." What are we trying to make here and why? When we can answer those questions and not just see eye to eye but be inspired at the possibilities, then we know we have something with legs. This allows Guru to have a consistent sensibility in our work that people who pay close attention recognize. We care deeply about the characters we put on screen — as if they are real — because to us, they *are*! Some may be more flawed than others, and some are born into the animated universe with less noble intentions, but the thing to watch for in all the animation that comes out of Guru is how lovable the characters are. That's something we do better than anyone. And when you truly love the soul of a character, it doesn't fade away. Love is forever!

In fact, our logo is highly influenced by the Robert Indiana "LOVE" sculptures that you see in New York and other major centers. Its letters are imperfect, and you see the various characters leaning on each other to keep the integrity of the square shape. To us, that's what love is. It's messy and imperfect.

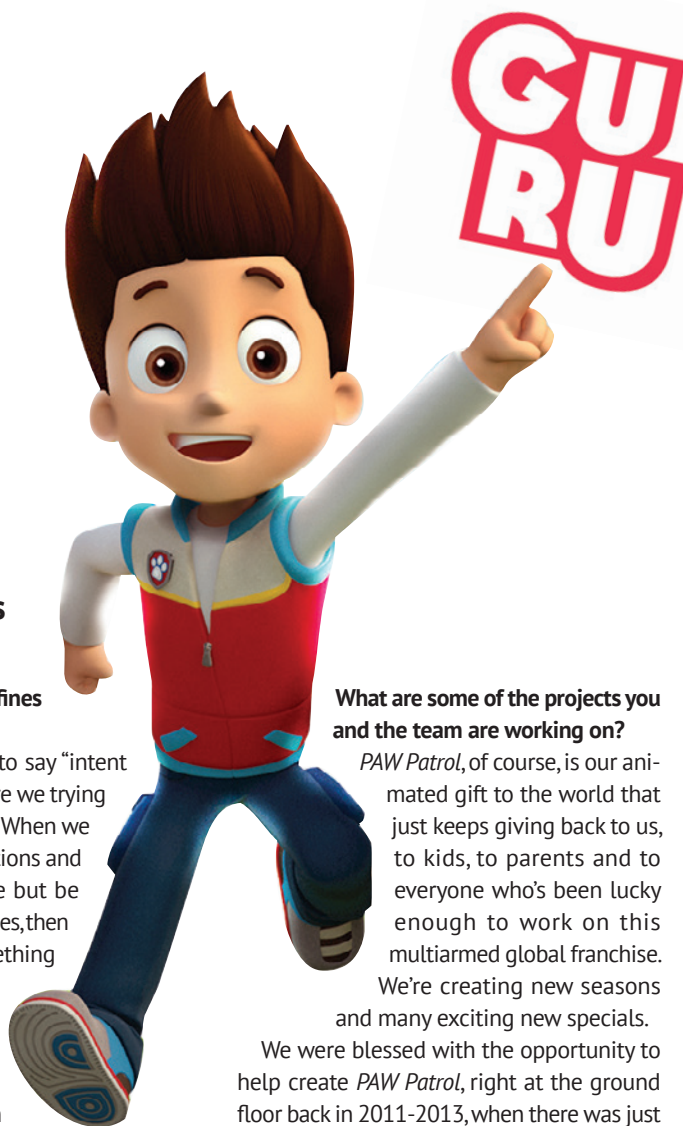
We consciously deny the formation of a house style. Style can be fleeting. It can fade as quickly as fashions fade. Worst of all, we're seeing now with AI that style can't be truly owned and can be easily mimicked. But I challenge AI to mimic a sensibility or a soulfulness.

**What are some of the projects you and the team are working on?**

*PAW Patrol*, of course, is our animated gift to the world that just keeps giving back to us, to kids, to parents and to everyone who's been lucky enough to work on this multiarmed global franchise. We're creating new seasons and many exciting new specials.

We were blessed with the opportunity to help create *PAW Patrol*, right at the ground floor back in 2011-2013, when there was just a rough bible and no scripts. The brilliant recipe that Keith Chapman and Spin Master had created for Paramount and Nick Jr. was great, but the ingredients needed a lot of love and our full attention. We all worked really closely that first year to help develop the look and feel and, most importantly, the good-natured, lovable and immutable heart that all the pups share and [the] spirit of kindness and well-intentioned humor and adventure that infuses the show and every part of the franchise to this day. It's something that no one, even some of the most talented humans with some of the biggest budgets on the planet, has been able to replicate, try though they may. So we feel very bullish against AI's sly thievery! We've already been through a decade of shows trying to copy what we've made — they all suffered from one fatal flaw: bad intentions.

We're also continuing our work with Sesame Workshop on *Mecha Builders* — with new shorts lighting up the vertical video spaces on the internet and breaking viewing records.







## MILESTONES

A few months ago, we also began production on *Julián*, a feature film co-production between Cartoon Saloon, Aircraft Pictures, Sun Creature, Melusine and Wychwood Media. **When you look back at the studio's 25-year history, what are some of the memories that make you smile?**

I think three key moments are the launch of *Justin Time*, the surprise breakout success of *PAW Patrol* and the streamer hit *True and the*

inspired us to build out the characters and the Rainbow Kingdom so that kids could look at the world as a wonderful place where people care about everything they come in contact with!

**Where do you see the studio going in the next 25 years?**

There are so many exciting new places to create new characters. We're doing lots of shorts these days and developing features and longer stories as well. The quality of what you put out there matters more than ever, and so we want to be constantly experimenting with format.



**'Every time our creative team chose to walk out into that fog, to step out onto that long uncertain precipice, we've always found ourselves in a more rewarding place.'**

**GURU STUDIO' FOUNDER  
AND PRESIDENT FRANK FALCONE**

*Rainbow Kingdom* — all of which continue to entertain audiences around the world.

Our very first original series, *Justin Time*, really put us on the map as a studio capable of creating a truly original type of kids' show that had all the elements we've become known for: unique design, adorable characters and big comedy adventure storytelling with clever nuance.

*PAW* came in the door looking like an unlikely success (dogs in cars with jobs?) and surprised us and the world. This is a testament to our team's ability, to nurture an idea and to really blow it up on screen in an exciting way!

*True and the Rainbow Kingdom* also came to our doorstep, having been rejected everywhere it had been pitched. FriendsWithYou, the artists behind the concept, had such good intentions, with animism at the heart of the entire universe: the belief that everything has a soul including trees, rocks and buses! The simple premise

had years of positive impact on brands, through deceptively simple pantomime acting, and in many ways, we seem to be returning to that very distilled way of creating new characters that you can instantly fall in love with and stay in love with for years.

I would hope that there will always be a need to create characters that can stand the test of time. I want to always be at the center of creating exciting characters that connect to as many people as possible, and that model good behavior and good relationships — I would hope that has a knock-on effect to our real relationships too!



Studio founder Frank Falcone, *Justin Time* creator Brandon James Scott and Mary Bredin (Guru's former exec VP)

the E.U.'s protective dome, and we increasingly find ourselves being targeted as the reason why creative investments into animation have slowed in the U.S. That's unfair. I think it's quite the opposite. Canadian talent has a very clear understanding of the types of stories we tell in this part of the world, and we have a very diverse population of immigrants who are more aware of regional storytelling styles from around the world. We have a respect for global culture that is unmatched and very inclusive. This has allowed U.S. creators to really focus on the highest values in their storytelling. Canadians are animation creators in their own right, and we understand the process and have always been here to help get it up on screen, no matter where the concept or the budget may originate.

**Any advice you would give your younger self if you could go back in time, knowing what you know now?**

That's something I don't do too often. I try not to live a "shoulda, woulda, coulda" life.

But if I was magically given an opportunity to advise a younger me, I would say, "Trust your instincts even more!" Dig deeper. Look further ahead. Don't be afraid to take more and bigger risks.

When I look back across 25 years at the studio, and 37 years

in animation, I see that the highlights of my own personal career, and of our studio's success, are directly aligned with the risks we chose to take. Every time our creative team chose to walk out into that fog, to step out onto that long uncertain precipice, we've always found ourselves in a more rewarding place. I think I can hear my older self telling me that now! ■



**What is your take on the current Canadian and global animation scene?**

Canada is a powerhouse that punches far above its weight class in animation, but lately, it's become a lonely little ice floe adrift on the sea. We can't share fully in the benefits of





# 25

**YEARS OF  
CHARACTER!**

**CELEBRATING...**  
STORIES you know  
CHARACTERS you love  
ADVENTURES to come

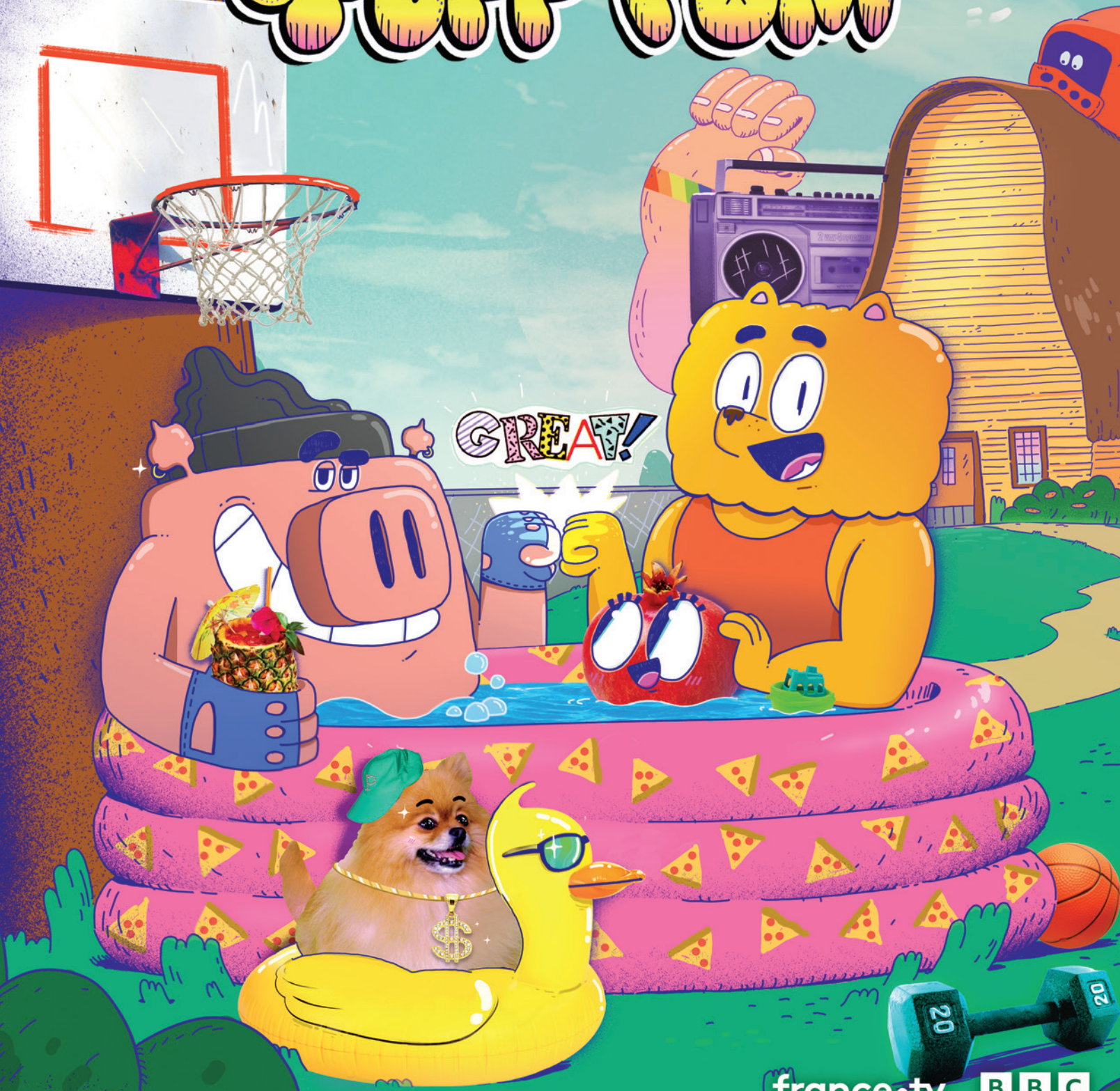
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# CLAYNOSAURZ

**MEET US  
IN ANNECY  
BOOTH  
C25**







# A Lakeside View of the Industry

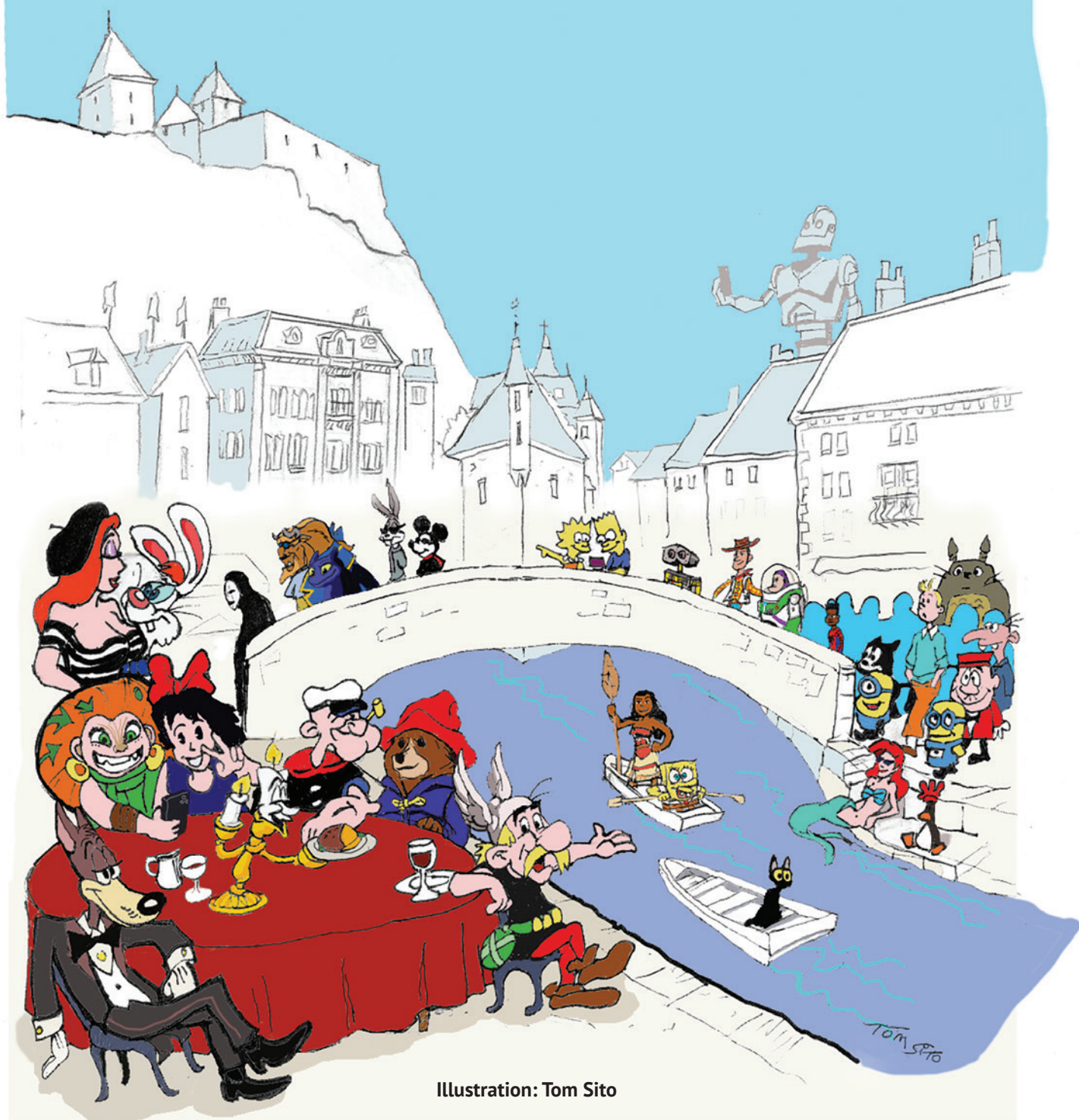


Illustration: Tom Sito



# With an eclectic mix of global animation auteurs and first looks at some of the top features, shorts and TV projects of the year, the 2025 edition of Annecy promises to be one for the books!

**J**ust when we thought the Annecy Festival and Market couldn't get any bigger or more ambitious, the organizers behind the popular event have upped the ante once again. In a recent interview, the festival's artistic director Marcel Jean, CITIA director **Mickaël Marin** and CITIA manager Véronique Encrenaz revealed some of the highlights of this year's global animation celebration, which takes place June 8-14 in the picture-perfect city in southeastern France.

**Congrats on the 2025 edition's phenomenal lineup. What are some of the must-see highlights?**

**Jean:** I believe this is one of the first times that we've had the opportunity to really focus on TV animation. We have amazing guests such as Matt Groening and David Silverman (*The Simpsons*) and Raphael Bob-Waksberg (*Boljack Horseman*), which gives us the opportunity to put a spotlight on the groundbreaking work that has been done for television. We also have Marvel Animation at Annecy for the first time, as well as great creators from Cartoon Network's 25-year history (Genndy Tartakovsky, Craig McCracken, Pendleton Ward, Rebecca Sugar, J.G. Quintel, Adam Muto). It's quite a rare occasion when the planets align and we can have all these creative artists in one place at the same time.

**Annecy is often one of the earliest events of the year to spotlight projects that will go on to win all the year-end awards. The most recent Oscar recipients – *Flow* and *In the Shadow of the Cypress* – were both Annecy winners last year. It seems that we have more animated movies coming out**

**in 2025 than ever before. What is your take on that?**

**Jean:** This year, we see the continuation of a trend we witnessed with *Flow* and *Memoir of a Snail*, which are both auteur-driven indies. *Flow* had this very unique aesthetic and was almost a science fiction movie with its vision of a postapocalyptic future. You know, Annecy was one of the first festivals that screened Gints Zilbalodis' first movie, *Away*. I still remember the feelings I had when I first watched that movie. I thought, "Well it's cool that one person created this movie all by himself," but then it really managed to hold my interest ... I thought he was such an exceptional talent. [This year], we have Momoko Seto's *Dandelion's Odyssey*, Félix Dufour-Laperrière's *Death Does Not Exist* and Ugo Bienvenu's *Arco*; all these movies have elements of science fiction as well as social criticism and climate change anxiety. It was very exciting to see animation creators tackle these important matters in a very personal way.

**There was some controversy last year about including AI-created animated shorts. What did you decide to do this year?**

**Jean:** We had a lot of shorts submitted this year that were either entirely or partially made with AI tools. We ended up with two shorts, one student-made and one professional project, in the Off-Limits section. These are shorts that actually address the way we think about AI. German director Ulu Braun's *Gerhard*, which is running in the Off-Limits sidebar, is an example of this. I met him in 2008 or 2009 when he had an experimental work in a film festival in Croatia. He's a very serious experimental filmmaker. As all experimental filmmakers [do], they use



Marcel Jean



Mickaël Marin



Véronique Encrenaz



new tools in technology to create new art. Boris Labbé's project also used AI, and he was awarded last year. In the early days of computer animation, people like Stan Vanderbeek and Peter Foldes experimented with the technology to create their shorts. This is what Ulu Braun did as well. That's the reason I believe we can't be dogmatic and just say no to AI. That's not the solution. We would simply like to give the animation community the opportunity to reflect on AI.

### What's on tap for the big 40th anniversary year of the MIFA market?

**Marin and Encrenaz:** It's a special year for us, especially because we've both worked at the market for 20 years. We've seen the market grow and evolve during these decades. We are seeing an increase in the number of countries that are attending the market. We have new countries like Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam and Bangladesh that have their own pavilion. We are seeing more participation from African countries as well as Costa Rica, and regulars like Germany, Spain and Italy are having stronger participation than before. We've also adapted the MIPFA campus to encourage more student participation, and we have bigger tents for master classes and informal [ones]. We also have many workshops for new technologies in real time and AI. Animation in gaming continues to be a big draw, and we're happy to have Riot and Fortiche return to Annecy for more



**Annecy's A-List:** This year's special guests include (L-R, top) Pete Docter, Matt Groening, Joanna Quinn, (middle) Genndy Tartakovsky, Rebecca Sugar, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, (bottom) Craig McCracken, Sylvain Chomet and Jared Bush.

panels about IP adaptations. There's also a special focus on animated music videos and animated documentaries. We had over 17,400 attendees last year, and we expect to see more or less the same number this year.

### Fantastic! As always, I have to ask you to give us some tips for having the best Annecy experience possible.

**Marin:** I would say make sure you check the weather forecast before, because you never know whether it's going to be very warm or very cold or rainy!

**Encrenaz:** The key is to prepare in advance, because there is just so much content, and you can't do everything. So you need to organize your time so

you can hit all the points of interest, but also you have to allow yourself some time to meet people and enjoy your time.

**Jean:** Remember to carpe diem, or seize the day. Don't get frustrated if you can't get into a big screening. I assure you that, at the same time, you will be able to catch a real gem at another theater where there is a seat for you. Yes, it's great to be one of the first people to see a big, anticipated movie, but you can also catch an incredible program of student shorts, where you will discover a huge unknown talent who will be very famous in five years! I remember seeing one of Spike Lee's earliest shorts before he took his first movie to Cannes! ■

**For more info and the latest schedule of events, visit [annecyfestival.com](http://annecyfestival.com).**



This year's festival includes a new art exhibit (at Le Pâquier) centered on Fortiche/Riot Games' acclaimed *Arcane* series.



# ANNECY 2025

## FESTIVAL

INTERNATIONAL DU FILM D'ANIMATION



### 8 - 14 JUNE

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la copie privée

Roman Djafari



# So Many Movies, So Little Time!

A quick look at some of the upcoming big animated titles unspooling at Annecy this month.

## THE OFFICIAL FILM COMPETITION



**Allah Is Not Obligated**  
Director: Zaven Najjar  
*France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Canada*



**The Last Blossom**  
Director: Baku Kinoshita  
*Japan*



**Little Amélie or the Character of Rain**  
Directors: Mailys Vallade and Liane-Cho Han  
*France*



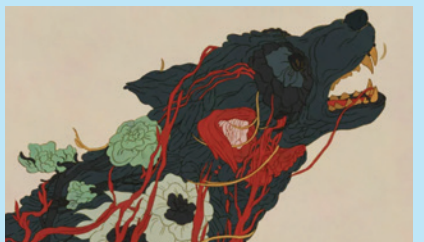
**Arco**  
Director: Ugo Bienvenu  
*France*



**ChaO**  
Director: Yasuhiro Aoki  
*Japan*



**Into the Mortal World**  
Director: Zhong Ding  
*China*



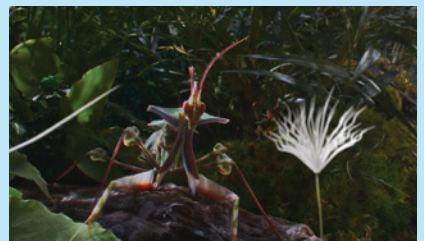
**Death Does Not Exist**  
Director: Felix Dufour-Laperrière  
*Canada, France*



**A Magnificent Life**  
Director: Sylvain Chomet  
*France, Luxembourg, Belgium*



**Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake**  
Director: Irene Iborra  
*Spain, France, Belgium, Chile*



**Dandelion's Odyssey**  
Director: Momoko Seto  
*France, Belgium*



## CONTRECHAMPE FEATURES



Lesbian Space Princess

### Balentes

Director: Giovanni Columbu  
*Italy*

### Endless Cookie

Directors: Seth & Peter Scriver  
*Canada*

### Jinsei

Director: Ryuya Suzuki  
*Japan*

**The Great History of Western Philosophy**  
Director: Aria Covamonas  
*Mexico*

### Lesbian Space Princess

Directors: Emma Hough Hobbs, Leela Varghese  
*Australia*

### Memory Hotel

Director: Heinrich Sabl  
*Germany*

### Nimuendaj

Director: Tania Cristina Anaya  
*Brazil, Peru*

### Olivia & The Clouds

Director: Tomás Pichardo  
*Español, Dominican Republic*

### Space Cadet

Director: Kid Koala,  
*U.S.A.*

### Tales from the Magic Garden

Directors: David Sukup, Patrik Pašš, Leon Vidmar, Jean-Claude Rozec  
*Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, Slovenia*

### The Square

Director: Bo-Sol Kim  
*South Korea*

## MIDNIGHT SPECIALS



All You Need Is Kill

### All You Need Is Kill

Director: Kenichiro Akimoto  
*Japan*

### Another World

Directors: Kai Chung, Tommy Ng  
*Hong Kong*

### Nightmare Bugs

Directors: Saku Sakamoto, Osamu Fukutani  
*Japan*

### Mononoke The Movie: Chapter II - The Ashes of Rage

Directors: Kenji Nakamura, Kiyotaka Suzuki  
*Japan*

### Heart of Darkness

Director: Rogerio Nunes  
*France, Brazil*

## WORKS IN PROGRESS



Carmen

### FEATURES

#### Carmen.

Sebastian Laudenbach  
*France*

#### The Devil's Vein.

Germán Acuña  
*Chile, Colombia*

#### In Waves.

Phuong Mai Nguyen  
*France, Belgium, U.S.A.*

#### Zsazsa Zaturannah.

Avid Liongoren  
*The Philippines, France*

#### Fallen.

Louis Clichy, Alexandre Astier  
*France, Belgium*

#### Daisy's Life.

Masaaki Yuasa  
*Japan, France*

#### Heirloom.

Upamanyu Bhattacharyya  
*India*

#### The Cat in the Hat.

Erica Rivinoja and Alessandro Carloni.  
*U.S.A.*

#### The Mourning Children.

Sunao Katabuchi  
*Japan*

#### Lucy Lost.

Olivier Clert  
*France*

#### Fairyheart.

Anita Doron  
*Hungary, Canada, Germany*

#### The Violinist.

Ervin Han, Raul Garcia  
*Singapore, Italy, Spain*

### SERIES

#### Bitches.

Caiman Productions  
*France*

#### Women Wearing Shoulder Pads.

Adult Swim, Cinema Fantasma  
*U.S.A., Mexico*

#### Get Jiro.

Warner Bros. Animation  
*U.S.A.*

#### Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Deathwatch.

Ubisoft, Netflix  
*France, U.S.A.*



# STUDIO SNEAK PEEKS

AT ANNECY



## AT A GLANCE

WHAT SOME OF THE BIG ANIMATION STUDIOS ARE UNVEILING AT THE FESTIVAL.

## ANIVENTURE/CINESITE

### Animal Farm

Directed by: Andy Serkis



**Synopsis:** This new animated adaptation of George Orwell's acclaimed novella follows a group of farm animals who rebel against their human owners, only to face new challenges under the rule of

a cunning pig named Napoleon. As their troubles escalate, the animals discover that revolution is just the beginning and must find the courage to stand up to Napoleon and save Animal Farm.

**Voice Cast:** Seth Rogen, Gaten Matarazzo, Steve Buscemi, Glenn Close, Laverne Cox, Kerin Culin, Woody Harrelson, Jim Parsons, Andy Serkis, Kathleen Turner, Iman Vellani.

**Creative Quote:** "After many years dreaming of bringing George Orwell's beloved fairytale to the screen, I am beyond thrilled to finally share our animated version of his epic, emotionally heartfelt and witty allegory, here at Annecy 2025," says director Andy Serkis. "We hope that its contemporary take will entertain and challenge enquiring hearts and minds of all ages, as we truly believe that it is quintessentially a family experience. Sometimes, stories do find their way to an audience at the right time. And the time for *Animal Farm* has most definitely come around again."



## Zootopia 2



**Directed by:** Jared Bush and Byron Howard

**Synopsis:** Detectives Judy Hopps (voiced by Ginnifer Goodwin) and Nick Wilde (voiced by Jason Bateman) find themselves on the twisting trail of a mysterious reptile who arrives in Zootopia and turns the animal metropolis upside down. To crack the case, Judy and Nick must go undercover to unexpected new parts of town, where their growing partnership is tested like never before.

**Creative Quote:** "One of my absolute favorite things about *Zootopia* is that there's so much of Jared and my goofy friendship reflected in these films," says director Byron Howard. "There are ridiculous animals in these stories because we love ridiculous animals, there are one thousand stupid puns in these movies because we love stupid puns. The fun that we have working



together shows up everywhere in the films, and the fun's contagious ... Every day we see someone on the crew with a sneaky smirk on their face, just waiting to unleash another terrible animal pun. Will it be

Chocolate Moose? Iguana hold your hand?"

**Voice Cast:** Ginnifer Goodwin, Jason Bateman, Ke Huy Quan, Fortune Feimster, Quinta Brunson

**Premieres:** Nov. 26, 2025

## The Bad Guys 2



**Directed by:** Pierre Perifel and JP Sans

**Synopsis:** The sequel finds our master criminals (now the Good Guys) pulled out of retirement and forced to do one last job by an all-female squad of evildoers!

**Voice Cast:** Sam Rockwell, Zazie Beetz, Awkwafina, Anthony Ramos, Alex Borstein, Marc Maron, Craig Robinson, Lilly Singh, Richard Ayoade.

**Creative Quote:** Director Pierre Perifel tells us, "It was incredibly fun and challenging to expand on the world we had created three years ago for *The Bad Guys* and push this next chapter towards bigger cinematic heights. I am so proud of what our talented crew of artists accomplished with this new opus. The film is a massive action-comedy that plays right off the tone we had established in the first movie. Not only is it



both highly sophisticated in its visuals, music and plot, but also incredibly silly in its humor and outrageous set pieces.

The whole film really is a thrilling ride from start to finish."

**Premieres:** Aug. 1, 2025



NETFLIX

## Long Story Short

**Creator:** Raphael Bob-Waksberg

**Synopsis:** *Long Story Short* is an animated comedy from the creator of *BoJack Horseman* about one family, over time. Jumping through the years, we follow the Schwooper siblings from childhood to adulthood and back again, chronicling their triumphs, disappointments, joys and compromises.



**Voice Cast:** Lisa Edlestein, Paul Reiser, Ben Feldman, Abbi Jacobson, Max Greenfield, Angelique Cabral, Nicole Byer, David Franco, Michael Dietz

**Creative Quote:** “There’s nothing like Annecy when it comes to celebrating the vast, beautiful universe of animation,” says Bob-Waksberg. “I’m honored I get to be a part of it. And honestly, I’ll take any excuse I can to get out of the United States right now. With all my projects I aspire to create something that will make people laugh, make people cry, and make angry dorks on the internet call me dumb and bad. I achieved all three with *BoJack Horseman*. With my new show I’m hoping to get at least two.”

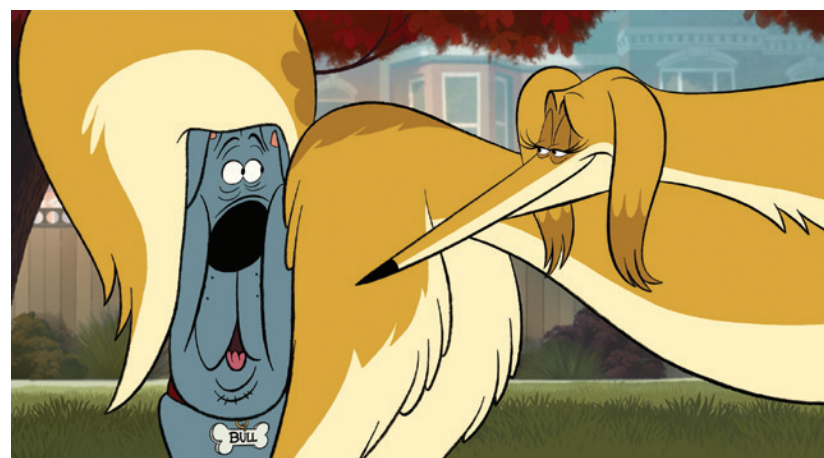
**Production:** ShadowMachine, Tornante  
**Premiere Date:** Aug. 22, 2025

NETFLIX

NETFLIX

## Fixed

**Director:** Genndy Tartakovsky



**Voice Cast:** Adam DeVine, Idris Elba, Kathryn Hahn, Bobby Moynihan, Fred Armisen, Beck Bennett, Michelle Buteau, River Gallo

**Synopsis:** From visionary director Genndy Tartakovsky comes this original adult animated comedy about Bull, an average, all-around good dog who discovers he’s

going to be neutered in the morning! As the gravity of this life-altering event sets in, Bull realizes he needs one last adventure with his pack of best friends as these are the last 24 hours with his balls! What could go wrong...?

**Creative Quote:** Director Genndy Tartakovsky says, “*Fixed* was a fever dream that somehow made it to reality! I woke up one day and realized — we actually made a 2D, hand-animated, R-rated cartoony feature. Not only did I get to collaborate with some of my favorite artists, but we did it through the lens of a heartfelt raunchy comedy. A true animation miracle! I can now retire in peace.”

**Production:** Sony Pictures Animation, Renegade, Lightstar  
**Premieres:** Aug. 13, 2025

NETFLIX



NETFLIX

## In Your Dreams

NETFLIX

**Director:** Alex Woo

**Voice Cast:** Jolie Hoang-Rappaport, Elias Janssen, Craig Robinson, Simu Liu, Cristin Milioti, Omid Djalili, Gia Carides, SungWon Cho, Zachary Noah Piser

**Synopsis:** This comedy adventure follows Stevie and her brother Elliot as they journey into the absurd landscape of their own dreams. If the siblings can withstand a snarky stuffed giraffe, zombie breakfast foods and the queen of nightmares, the Sandman will grant them their ultimate dream come true ... the perfect family.

**Creative Quote:** "There are two things that I love about this movie that makes it feel truly special," says Alex Woo. "The first is its exploration of the duality of dreams — the mysterious, often surreal experiences we have while we sleep, and the aspirational goals we chase when



we're awake. I find the intersection of these two ideas fascinating, and I think the audience will too. The second is more personal: I've always wanted to tell a story about siblings. I have a younger brother, and our relationship has been full of ups and downs, but through it all,

we're always there for each other. He's the person I've shared the most years, tears, and jeers with, and capturing that dynamic felt like a powerful emotional anchor for a film."

**Production:** Kuku Studio

**Premieres:** Fall 2025

PARAMOUNT

## Smurfs

*Paramount*

**Directed by:** Chris Miller

**Synopsis:** When Razamel and Gargamel kidnap Papa Smurf, Smurfette lead the rest of the gang on a mission to the real world to rescue him in this new musical comedy.

**Voice Cast:** Rihanna (Smurfette), Nick Offerman, Natasha Lyonne, JP Karliak, Dan Levy, Amy Sedaris, Nick Kroll, James Corden, Octavia Spender, Hannah Waddingham, Sandra Oh, Alex Winter, Billie Lourd, Xolo Mariduena, Kurt Russell, John Goodman

**Creative Quote:** "The new *Smurfs* movie sets itself apart from its predecessors by visually embracing the charm and style of Peyo's original comics that first brought the little blue tinies to life," says Chris Miller. "The movie combines a vibrant color palette, expressive character designs in an immersive CG environments that evoke a nostalgic connection to Peyo's world, creating a more entertaining cinematic experience that long-time fans and newcomers will appreciate. Our movie is all about heart and humor, blending the classic slapstick charm of the original comics with a fresh, sharp wit. The Smurfs are sincere, never cynical, but far from naïve. Life in Smurf Village means that everyone has a 'thing'— a



built-in identity, but the journey in this film is not about the individual, it's about the strength of the community. That is the Smurf super power, because collective kindness should never be mistaken for weakness. *Smurfs* is a fun ride that's got the heart, comedy and brains for everyone!"

**Production:** Paramount Animation, IMPS

**Premieres:** July 18, 2025



## SONY PICTURES ANIMATION

**GOAT**SONY PICTURES  
**ANIMATION****Directed by:** Tyree Dillihay; co-directed by Adam Rosette

**Synopsis:** This original action-comedy set in an all-animal world follows Will, a small goat with big dreams who gets a once-in-a-lifetime shot to join the pros and play roarball – a high-intensity, co-ed, full-contact sport dominated by the fastest, fiercest animals in the world. Will's new teammates aren't thrilled about having a little goat on their roster, but Will is determined to revolutionize the sport and prove once and for all that "smalls can ball!"

**Creative Quote:** Director Tyree Dillihay says, "I am so excited to bring the first-ever look at my dream project, *GOAT*, to the fans at Annecy! The film is a love letter to the undying spirit of the underdog, and we can't wait to share a sneak peek with one of the best fandoms in the world!"

**Release date:** Feb. 13, 2026

## SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

**A Magnificent Life (Marcel et Monsieur Pagnol)****Directed by:** Sylvain Chomet

**Synopsis:** In 1955, 60-year-old Marcel Pagnol is a well-known and acclaimed playwright and filmmaker. When the editor in chief of *ELLE* magazine commissions a weekly column about Pagnol's

childhood, he begins exploring his incredible life and career along with a vision of himself as a young boy.

**Voice Cast:** Laurent Lafitte, Flora Montgomery, Matthew Gravelle

**Creative Quote:** "I have always been a great admirer of Marcel Pagnol's work, so I was immediately won over by the idea of writing and directing an animated biopic on his life," says writer-director Sylvain Chomet (*The Triplets of Belleville*, *The Illusionist*). "I wanted to tell his story and try to understand and reveal the man behind his work. It is through the innocence of Marcel as a child that I have chosen to express the profoundly human and universal values of the man, because I am convinced that our era needs to return to this poetry and language of humanity."

**Production Partners:** What The Prod, Mediawan, Bidibul, Walking the Dog

**Release Date:** Oct. 15 (France: Wild Bunch), fourth quarter (U.S.: Sony Pictures Classics)





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# A Modern Fable in Miniature

Oscar-nominated directors Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski discuss the making of their new Annecy short *The Girl Who Cried Pearls*.

By Jennifer Wolfe

Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski return to Annecy this month with a luminous stop-motion tale years in the making. *The Girl Who Cried Pearls*, produced by Julie Roy, Marc Bertrand and Christine Noël at the National Film Board of Canada, will make its world premiere at the festival as part of the official shorts competition. Set in Montreal at the turn of the 20th century, the 17.5-minute short is a handcrafted modern fable about a boy and a girl brought together by sorrow — and the temptations of greed.

*The Girl Who Cried Pearls* marks a deliberate departure from the surreal, dreamlike space that defined Lavis and Szczerbowski's 2008 Oscar-nominated short, *Madame Tutli-Putli*. Working under their Clyde Henry Productions banner, the longtime creative partners embraced the challenges of linear storytelling while continuing their commitment to collaboration, creative risk and deliberate resistance to ego.

## The Necklace Incident

The image that sparked the film first emerged during production of *Madame Tutli-Putli*, a hybrid short blending stop motion and

live action. While filming a chaotic sequence that ends with the titular character in tears, a prop necklace broke unexpectedly, scattering pearls across the set.

"There was Laurie [Maher] sitting in a chair with tears streaming down her face," Szczerbowski recounts. "And when I looked down, there were pearls all over the ground, and it was like, 'Hey, come check this out. This is something.'"

That fleeting, accidental image became the seed of *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* — but it would be years before the idea took shape. Along the way, other inspirations surfaced, including Man Ray's 1932 photograph "Glass Tears," with its iconic close-up of synthetic pearls on a weeping face.

"The most avant-garde challenge for us was to tell a straight story," says Lavis. "The fact is, it's the first thing we've ever written that has actual spoilers," he adds, explaining how they built what he describes as "the basic idea of this sort of Hans Christian Andersen story," only to find themselves struggling with how to resolve it. "We couldn't figure out a way out of that kind of basic storytelling," he said.

"Those stories are wonderful," Szczerbowski says. "We grew up on them, and they're very straightforward, and they're intriguing and

**Emotions in Stop Motion:** The Oscar-nominated duo Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski's lovely new short *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* is inspired by the unsettling world of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales.

unforgettable. But our joke is that some of the Hans Christian Andersen stories have a Hans Christian agenda ... It would've been disingenuous of us to tell a story like that. It is not how the world filters through our consciousness."

The visual world of *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* is both richly atmospheric and intricately detailed. Drawing inspiration from religious statuary, the directors designed puppets with serene, mask-like faces that evoke sacred iconography. The decision to leave the faces expressionless meant the animators had to convey emotion entirely through body language, posture and timing.

The animation was shot using a Canon EOS 6D DSLR camera, with lighting and even color correction captured in camera — a deliberate choice that lends the film its painterly, luminous quality. The cinematography is executed on a grand scale, employing meticulous framing and ambitious wide shots with complex camera moves, many of which the duo have detailed on their Instagram page.



**“The most avant-garde challenge for us was to tell a straight story. The fact is, it’s the first thing we’ve ever written that has actual spoilers.”**

**DIRECTOR CHRIS LAVIS**

**“Our joke is that some of the Hans Christian Andersen stories have a Hans Christian agenda ... It would’ve been disingenuous of us to tell a story like that. It is not how the world filters through our consciousness.”**

**DIRECTOR MACIEK SZCZEBOWSKI**



The film unfolds across nearly a dozen sets, from Parisian exteriors and interiors to early 20th century Montreal neighborhoods near the Old Port. Montreal-specific details — like the vintage streetcars and familiar facades — add texture and resonate as a quiet love letter to the filmmakers’ home city.

The production team invested deeply in the film’s material world. Costumes were designed and hand-sewn by longtime collaborator Yso South, using textiles carefully selected to work at puppet scale. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of props populate the film’s miniature sets. Some were 3D printed by art director Brigitte Henry and painted by hand; others were thrifted or handcrafted from scratch, including tiny books and curiosities in the film’s cluttered pawn shop. The animation was executed by a small team, including Laura Stewart, Laura Venditti and Peggy Arel, all of whom brought their own sensibilities to the film’s finely tuned emotional beats.

### **Crafting Emotion in Constraint**

Production began in earnest in 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic forced the team to rethink their working methods. Puppets were sculpted and exchanged through alleyway handoffs, and social distancing protocols resulted in oversized puppet heads — a practical constraint that became an unexpected stylistic feature.

In place of traditional storyboards, Lavis and Szczebowski drew on their background in experimental theater, staging scenes with live actors and filming rough live-action cinematics to explore rhythm and timing. “We have no storyboards,” Lavis explains. “And our animatics are live action.” Storyboarding, Szczebowski adds, felt fundamentally wrong for their process: “It’s the antithesis of live theater ... This is comics. This is not film language.”

For the first time, the directors also shared animation duties with their team, embracing an “exquisite corpse” approach in which each animator worked independently. Stewart, tasked with a tender sequence of a father bandaging his daughter’s hand, delivered such emotionally precise work that the directors restructured animation assignments around her sensibility.

They even began splitting scenes between animators, with one handling a character on one side of the frame while another animated the one opposite — a practical workaround that soon evolved into a creative choice. “We took away this idea that shots are sacred,” says Lavis. “And that actually became this whole new technique that we’d never indulged before ... it almost becomes like an improvisation where you take over a sentence.”

### **Sound, Music and the Clyde Henry Vibe**

To score the film, Lavis and Szczebowski turned to longtime creative partner and Canadian recording artist Patrick Watson, whose earlier collaborations with the duo include *Gymnasia*, *Strangers* and a series of music videos. Watson’s music is integral to the atmosphere of *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* — so much so that the directors credit it with saving the film during a difficult editing phase.

“There was a truly dark moment,” Szczebowski recalls, “when we first assembled the entire thing into a running picture and realized that it was gravely lacking in tempo.” Watson immediately saw what was missing. “‘Linger,’ he said. ‘Let these things play out so I can actually give them emotional meaning.’” The suggestion ultimately reshaped the film’s pacing — and deepened its emotional core.

The idea for *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* first surfaced over 15 years ago, but the project didn’t gain traction until Lavis and

Szczebowski connected with producer Julie Roy following a 2017 retrospective screening of *Madame Tutli-Putli* at Annecy. Then head of the NFB’s French Program, Roy approved *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* as a French-language production — a decision the filmmakers recall with poignancy. Although the NFB’s English and French programs have since merged, the directors still consider the project primarily a French film.



“We actually have two really unique and really, I think, pretty good films in both languages,” Szczebowski says, noting the separate English and French narration recorded by Canadian actor Colm Feore and theater veteran James Hyndman.

In 2023, *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* was presented at Annecy as a work in progress — the first time a short film had been featured in that format. This year, the creative journey of the filmmakers has come full circle as the short is one of 35 titles competing in the festival’s official competition. ■

**For more info, visit [nfb.ca/animation](https://nfb.ca/animation).**



A quick sampler of the wonderful animated shorts in competition at Annecy this year.

# A Global Smorgasbord

By Ramin Zahed

## LES BÊTES (THE BEASTS)

DIRECTED BY MICHAEL GRANBERRY

**F**ive years ago, animation veteran Michael Granberry realized he had dozens of very old stop-motion puppets that were abandoned and never used. "These weird, unique characters were rapidly decomposing, but instead of throwing them away, I decided to put them all in a movie together and see what would happen," says the Emmy-winning director.

Believe it or not, Granberry's project features about 246 distinct puppets ranging in size from 5/6th of an inch to 16 inches in height, made from foam, wire, latex, bakeable clays and other assorted materials. He recalls, "We had eight basic sets, which were all made from recycled and repurposed materials and designed very much like theater flats that could be reconfigured and moved quickly atop a 2' x 4' animation stage!"

Granberry, who has worked on wide variety of award-winning TV shows (*Tumble Leaf*, *In the Know*,



*The Tiny Chef Show*, *Severance*) and movies (*Wendell & Wild*, *Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio*) believes stop motion to be "some sort of alchemy through which ordinary materials can be transformed into mesmerizing visual storytelling, all through the physical efforts of an artist wrestling with their craft." He adds, "It's like watching a magic trick that, even though you know exactly how it's done, still captivates you!"

So, why was *Les Bêtes* shot in black and white? "Since the characters were all originally built for other projects, the color palette was all over the map and, frankly, insane to look at," explains Granberry. "I put a black-and-white filter over some early camera tests and the result reminded me of a 1930s Ladislav Starevich animation, which inspired the idea that this film could perhaps be a kind

of tribute to his work."

The director says he fell in love with stop-motion animation after watching Ray Harryhausen's classic 1958 epic *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* when he was only eight. "I was also inspired by such modern luminaries as Henry Selick, Phil Tippett, Will Vinton, Suzie Templeton, Max Winston, Robert Morgan and Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski of Clyde Henry Productions."

Granberry says it feels wonderful to be part of the Annecy Festival this year. "Honestly, after years of working on larger studio projects, the thought of attending a legendary festival like Annecy with a zero-budget film born from little more than scrappy determination is quite humbling!" he says. "I'd love to leave the audience with this message: That kindness is always preferable to cruelty. And when we are confused about who 'the beasts' are, we should pause and examine how we are treating each other." ■

## TAPEWORM ALEXIS & THE OPERA DIVA

DIRECTED BY THAÏS ODERMATT

**S**wiss director Thaïs Odermatt was fascinated by the life of opera singer Maria Callas. So, she decided to make an animated short about the acclaimed Greek soprano. "I learned that, at the beginning of her career, she was overweight and lost 30 kilograms within six months," she tells us. "There's actually an urban myth that she had a tapeworm 'raging' in her intestines to achieve the quick weight loss!"

Odermatt and her team of nine took about four years to finish the short using After Effects and Toon Boom. "This was my first animated film — as I've been a documentary and experimental filmmaker. I had



to learn how the animators work. Everything was very precise and detailed. For me, working in animation was so exciting because you have complete freedom and

there are no limits to creativity."

The short's visual style was inspired by the gossip magazines of the 1960s, the time when Callas often appeared in their pages. "Only

the interior view of the stomach has a different visual language," says Odermatt. "It has more depth of field and, as a result, it appears more three-dimensional. My big animation influence was Terry Gilliam."

The director says she knew from the very beginning that this particular story had to be told in animation. "Images of an actual tapeworm in the stomach are pretty gruesome!" she explains. "No one would want to watch that for long! I just want people to marvel at and laugh about the crazy story of the tapeworm and the opera diva. And it would be nice if the tragedy also comes through a little." ■



## LUNA ROSSA (RED MOON)

DIRECTED BY OLGA AND PRIIT PÄRN

**E**stonian husband-and-wife team Olga and Priit Pärn are familiar figures in the global animation scene. The talented duo has been a festival favorite with acclaimed titles such as *Divers in the Wind*, *Frank & Wendy* and *Life Without Gabriella Ferri*. This year, their latest collaboration, *Luna Rossa (Red Moon)*, offers a fascinating look at crime prevention in our modern era.

"We started out to make a film about crime prevention," the directors tell *Animation Magazine*. "Suspicious individuals are tracked, and security cameras come into play ... At some point, we wanted to show that both we and the viewers of the film are simply observers."

The 32.5-minute short took about five years to complete. "We used motion capture, actors, 3D puppets, camera and set layouts to create the animation," says Olga. "Then, Priit drew all the 2D animation and layouts for animation in TVPaint. Finally, the film was



composed in After Effects."

"Working with motion capture was a bit of a challenge," says Priit. "This technology was completely new to us, and it also included working with our fantastic actors. The real pleasure was working with the backgrounds and, as always, the sound of the film. The film premiered in southern Italy, where the city around us and the city on our screen seemed to be one and

the same," recalls Priit. "The Italians in the audience sang along to the songs sung by our characters on the screen."

Olga adds, "When it was shown on the big screen at the opening of Fredrikstad Festival in Norway, the public walked out from the screening room dancing (just like the character in the short). We saw the powerful influence of Priit's choreography on the public after

the screening. It was unexpected and amazing!"

Priit says he likes to go to festivals like Annecy with low expectations. "Our work is done, and we have no way or desire to influence what happens next! I decided to work in animation about 49 years ago," he says. "During that time, I've changed my mind many times, but I've continued. Do I still want to work in animation? I can't answer that right now!"

Olga is more fatalistic. "My parents are animation directors," she says. "When I saw them working, I thought I would never choose this profession. After I completed my graphic art studies, I still ended up as an animator. You can't escape your destiny!"

"My principle is that I don't moralize," concludes Priit. "I don't teach what's right or wrong and how to live. I assume that my viewers are free to take away what they want. The main thing is that they don't get bored!" Olga adds, "And I agree!" ■

## LIFE WITH AN IDIOT

DIRECTED BY THEODORE USHEV

**M**ore than 25 years ago, Oscar-winning director Theodore Ushev (*Blind Vaysha*, *The Physics of Sorrow*) read the book *Life With an Idiot* by Russian dissident author Victor Erofeyev. The story stayed with him as he prepared himself both technically and mentally to take it on.

"The absurdity of the narrative required immense skill and the right collaborators," he notes. "In 2019, I met Emmanuel-Alain Raynal and Pierre Baussaron from Miyu. They took a leap of faith and agreed to produce the film — something for which I am deeply grateful. They secured the rights from Erofeyev, who, in the meantime, had faced trouble with Russian authorities and the Putin regime and emigrated to Germany."

Ushev began drawing the film seven years ago, and the first draft of the script, which he co-wrote with his daughter Alexandra



Ouchev, was completed in 2019. He used ink and aquarelle on paper to bring the project to life. "Additionally, I animated it using the free software Krita, developing my own ink and aquarelle tools in the process," he adds. "I handled the animation, editing and coloring myself. Alexandra assisted with the text. The music and sound were crafted by the brilliant French composer and musician Yan Volsy. The voices were performed by

Dominique Pinon and Lucy Page, who contributed as both a singer and composer."

The director says the film tackles an absurd story embedded in themes of totalitarianism, violence and misogyny. "The challenge was to infuse it with sharp humor while maintaining good taste and avoiding vulgarity," Ushev points out. "Additionally, the technique itself is highly labor-intensive, and working alone on every frame was

no easy feat. On top of that, this was the smallest budget I have ever worked with."

Annecy holds a special place in Ushev's heart. "It's a festival that has always been kind to me," he says. "Over the years, I've received all the possible Cristals there, and it truly feels like home. Just two years ago, I had a major retrospective exhibition at the Musée du Château. Yet, each time feels like the first, and I'm eagerly anticipating my film's premiere. It's a rare and precious moment — the competition is so fierce that you never know if you'll ever make it back!"

He adds, "After 20 years in animation, I've learned one thing — never worry about how an audience will receive a film. If people disagree with or even feel scandalized by *Life With an Idiot*, I will consider that a success. My goal is to spark discussion!" ■



## ATOMIK TOUR

DIRECTED BY BRUNO COLLET

**F**ive years ago, Bruno Collet's short *Memorable* won the Cristal at Annecy and went on to be nominated for an Oscar. This year, the talented French director is back at the festival with *Atomik Tour*, a black-and-white stop-motion film that centers on "dark tourism." "I was inspired by Shahak Shapira's work titled *Yolocaust*," says the filmmaker. "By discovering the disrespectful behavior of tourists at the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, Shapira made me realize how important it is for some people to visit places marked by tragedy in order to promote themselves on social networks. My short invites us to follow a young YouTuber to the radioactive city of Chernobyl. For him, the number of victims of the greatest nuclear disaster of all time is of little importance. All that matters is his image and the number of views that appear on his phone screen."

It took Collet three months to make the sets and puppets, three months to shoot the film and three months for postproduction, including sound and special effects. "I really started working on *Atomik*



*Tour* two years ago. As with my previous productions, once the script is written, I start shaping my characters. Once I'm satisfied with their design, I bring in the team who creates the molds, the prints and the puppet armatures.

A team of about 60 people worked on the short — half of them were based in France (Vivement Lundi) and the other half were in the Czech Republic (Maur Film)."

One of the big challenges for Collet and his team was making the

city of Chernobyl and re-creating the accident at the nuclear power plant. "Given my limited budget, I decided to shoot many scenes in front of a bluescreen," he explains. "This allowed me to use different scales for both the sets and the puppets. We had four different sizes for our 15 characters. Thanks to 'multilayered' filming, made possible by the use of motion control, a puppet such as the Liquidator (the person in charge of evacuating radioactive rubble from the power plant) could be replicated several times to form a group of workers."

Commenting on the fast-changing world of animation, Collet notes, "When I started stop motion at the end of the 1990s, the animation world predicted that this old technique would disappear with the advent of computer-generated images. Thirty years on, I can see that this is not the case. Look at the selection of animated feature films at this year's Oscars. Out of five films, two were made in stop motion. It seems that this old technique, with its craftsmanship and imperfections, still fascinates directors and audiences alike!" ■

## MURMURATION (ZWERMEN)

DIRECTED BY JANNEKE SWINKELS AND TIM FRIJSINGER

**A**n elderly man in a nursing home suddenly begins to turn into a bird in Janneke Swinkels and Tim Frijnsinger's memorable stop-motion short. The initial ideas for the short were inspired by Janneke's graduation film at Kask art school in Belgium, which was a documentary about her grandfather, filmed at his nursing home. "We really started writing a first draft of the script in 2019," the filmmakers tell us. "We always worked on commissioned work with just the two of us and never made an animated short before, so getting the funding together for a 12-minute stop-motion film was pretty hard. That's one of the reasons why it took us almost eight years to get the film made. We also had our little daughter Ida along the way, so



that also made some things more complicated!"

The duo made all of the films' puppets and props themselves and used Dragonframe at the Holy Motion Studio in Arnhem, Netherlands. "We always wanted to make a stop-motion film," they say.

"It's really the feeling of the fabric and the craftsmanship that drew us to it. The characters that you can literally feel in your hands. It's playing with dolls, but it feels as if you can really make them breathe."

Swinkels and Frijnsinger say the most challenging part was

to keep believing in their work and their talents. "We have seen/made every change in the edit and have seen the film tirelessly, [yet] we still see every little flaw or bit we really wanted to have done different," says Swinkels. "We always were both a bit of animation nerds I guess, and most people we met in the animation industry are really nice people. We just always wanted to be part of that."

The directors are big fans of the works of stop-motion masters such as Marc James Roels, Emma De Swaef and Niki Lindroth von Bahr. "We also love the films of Michel Gondry, and maybe the work of Roy Andersson was a bit of an influence," they say. "Most people can relate to the subject of our film to some degree, so we hope they will find a bit of comfort in it." ■



## THANK YOU, DR. FARSI

DIRECTED BY SAMANEH SHOJAEI

**I**ranian director Samaneh Shojaei's new animated short *Thank You, Dr. Farsi* centers on a young girl who believes she has recovered after her therapy treatment, but the truth is that her situation has actually worsened.

"This isn't necessarily a critique of therapists or treatment but rather an exploration of how deeply ingrained issues can resist easy solutions," says the director. "This concept came about when my spouse [screenwriter Amin Kafashzadeh] and I observed a therapy group celebrating at a restaurant ... Their upbeat positive conversation hinted at a deeper unhappiness, reigniting our fascination with psychological states. Our short explores the common experiences of social disconnection and internal disorientation. It also touches upon our tendency to judge others, perhaps as a way of deflecting from our own potential disconnect from



our authentic selves."

The initial work for the short began in the winter of 2021, and the film was completed in January 2025. "Preproduction took around two years, primarily due to financial limitations and resource acquisition," says Shojaei. "A common concern for independent filmmakers is managing overlapping projects during production. I used TVPaint for animation, coloring

and texturing. I then used Adobe Premiere for editing, After Effects for compositing and Photoshop for the background visuals. We had about 13 people on our crew."

Shojaei says directing the short was the most challenging aspect of the project. "However, a major hurdle was the narration throughout the film," she adds. "Ensuring it enhanced the rhythm without becoming distracting. The

challenge lay in creating visuals that paralleled the narration without simply repeating it. I originally made the film in Persian, my native language, and only decided to switch to an English narrator at the very end. Rewriting the text for clarity and ease of pronunciation was the final challenge."

The filmmaker says she's very proud of how Iranian animation has been in the global spotlight over the past few years. "This year's Oscars felt like a moment we'd been waiting for," she says, reflecting on Hossein Molayemi and Shirin Sohani's Academy Award-winning short, *In the Shadow of the Cypress*. "It's incredibly motivating for indie filmmakers like us. The strength of Iranian animation has always been its quality, particularly the compelling stories behind the visuals, and many Iranian animators have consistently been recognized at festivals." ■

## BREAD WILL WALK

DIRECTED BY ALEX BOYA

**F**ive years in the making, *Bread Will Walk* is the latest in indie director Alex Boya's long list of creative shorts. The project, which was also part of the Directors' Fortnight selection at the Cannes Festival this year, was born from the filmmaker's fascination with how nourishment can be reshaped into a mechanism of influence. He explains, "It challenges narrative conventions, turning bread into metaphor and appetite into a societal force. I wanted to reimagine affection and perseverance through a surreal perspective that resonates with both the present and the timeless."

Produced by Jelena Popović and the National Film Board of Canada, the short also features the work of sound designer Olivier Calvert, composer Martin Floyd Cesar and actor Jay Baruchel as the sole voice performer. "The workflow remained tightly knit, hands-on and steadily refined across all stages," adds Boya. "A special mention goes to



technical directors Eloi Champagne and Mathieu Tremblay, whose creative collaboration was key to integrating my experimental processes into the pipeline."

Boya says that the short's aesthetic blends anatomical renderings with textures that feel unstable and alive. "The environment appears in constant transformation, giving a sense of decay and rebirth," he notes. "The entire piece flows without

cuts, preserving the illusion of a continuous shot. Influences include propaganda visuals, scientific diagrams and educational illustrations, all contributing to an atmosphere that feels absurd yet oddly convincing."

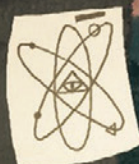
When asked about his influences, Boya replies, "I take inspiration from animators who explore internal landscapes and psychological texture. Yamamura, Švankmajer and Pärn have deeply

shaped my thinking. Martine Chartrand's painted rhythms and Fritz Kahn's surreal anatomy also inform my approach. My references stretch across disciplines, including scientific imaging, early documentary forms and the surrealist traditions of Eastern Europe."

The director believes that his new offering speaks in a visual language unfamiliar to most viewers. "Some respond to its humor, others to its commentary on desire and control," Boya says. "I take pride in how we preserved the integrity of handcrafted animation while expanding its range with cautiously applied technological enhancements. I hope audiences will recognize that hunger exists in many forms. Beyond physical needs, the film reflects on emotional, existential and societal appetites. If the viewing experience prompts reflection on personal and collective systems, or leaves a sense of thoughtful unease, then its purpose has been met!" ■

# Subversive, Sardonic & Sublime

Hungarian Animation:  
From Cutouts to Cannes



Symphony No. 42 (2023)

By Chris Robinson

**A**s Annecy prepares to shine a spotlight on Hungarian animation, it's the perfect moment to take a brief but vivid tour through a rich, resilient and often overlooked creative tradition.

It all begins in 1914 with István Kiszly Kató, widely regarded as the father of Hungarian animation. A graphic artist by trade and creator of weekly cartoon news bulletins, Kiszly ventured into film using cutouts — a method both inventive and practical. He produced a handful of short films, including *Janos the*

*Knight* (1916) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1931).

In 1928, former painter Sándor Bortnyik opened a school for promotional art — a space that became a breeding ground for talent and experimentation. It was here that a young Gyula Macskássy met fellow graphic artist János Halász. In 1932, the two founded a studio that would go on to produce over 100 animated commercials, working across a wide range of techniques.

## Opportunities Abroad

But ambition had limits in prewar Hungary. The political climate and limited artistic

freedom led many creatives to seek opportunities abroad. Halász moved to England and rebranded himself as John Halas, co-founding the iconic Halas and Batchelor studio. György Marczincsák, another émigré, became George Pal, later famed for his pioneering stop-motion work in the United States.

In 1948, the nationalization of Hungary's film industry marked a turning point. Animation was slow to benefit — the country produced only one or two films a year in the 1950s — but seeds were being planted. One such milestone was *The Little Cock's Diamond Halfpenny* (1951), Hungary's first

Duel (1960)



Ball with White Dots (1961)



Passion (1961)





color animation, directed by Macskássy and Edit Fekete.

Up until the mid-1950s, production was handled by Mafilm's Newsreel and Documentary Studio. But change was brewing. In 1954, Mafilm was folded into the Hungarian Synchronisation Co., and by 1959, a dedicated animation department had evolved into what would become the Pannonia Film Studio.

### The New Wave

The 1960s ushered in a new era. Under the leadership of György Matolcsy, Pannonia Film broke away from its strictly child-focused roots. A new wave of Hungarian animators began tackling complex philosophical, intellectual and social themes – blending bold visual storytelling with sharp, often subversive, commentary.

Pannonia Film Studio stepped onto the world stage in 1960 with two standout works by Gyula Macskássy: *Pencil and India Rubber* and *Duel*. The latter – a powerful allegory featuring a Greek warrior locked in battle with a scientist – portrayed the eternal tension between war and peace. *Duel* earned the Jury's Special Prize at Cannes. Just a year later, Tibor Csermák's *The Ball With White Dots* captured the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, further cementing Pannonia's growing international reputation.

But the true breakthrough came with *Passion* (1961), directed by József Nepp. Using sharp caricature and a modern sensibility, the film broke away from Hungary's folkloric tradition and dove headfirst into the psychological and social complexities of contemporary life.

During the 1960s, Pannonia dipped into the world of television. Perhaps the studio's most beloved creation was *Gustavus*. Inspired

by the tone and technique of *Passion*, this animated satire followed the bumbling exploits of a hapless but well-meaning everyman. His comedic stumbles resonated across borders, and by the 1970s, *Gustavus* had reached over 70 countries.

As the decade progressed, Pannonia leaned into artistic experimentation. György Kovásznai pushed animation into uncharted territory with *Double Portrait*, a film painted in oil where the faces of a man and woman continuously transform in a hypnotic dance of color and form. Sándor Reisenbüchler made his striking debut with *Kidnapping of the Sun and the Moon*, a vibrant collage inspired by Hungarian folk motifs and the poetry of Ferenc Juhász.

### Absurdist Humor

A distinctly Hungarian blend of dark, absurdist humor ran through much of the studio's work. Influenced by the satirical edge of Zagreb and Estonian animation, Pannonia artists wielded sarcasm as a tool for cultural critique. Their stories often reflected the contradictions of everyday life under socialism, exposing cracks with irony rather than outrage.

In 1968, a wave of economic reforms ended the era of rigid Stalinist planning, introducing a new model that gave businesses more autonomy – and more pressure. For Pannonia Film Studio, this meant adjusting to a dual mission: creating artistically ambitious work *and* making sure it could find a market.

Despite the added challenge, Pannonia

Amok (2022)



thrived in the 1970s. In 1973, Pannonia made its leap into feature-length animation with *Johnny Corncob*, a vibrant, psychedelic adaptation of a Hungarian folk epic directed by Marcell Jankovics. It was bold, dazzling and a hit – enough so that the studio

launched a dedicated feature animation division soon after.

Even as it embraced the mainstream, older animators continued probing ethical and philosophical themes, while a younger generation turned their focus to more contemporary, often urban realities. The result was a decade rich in experimentation. Two of the studio's brightest gems from the era – Reisenbüchler's *The Year of 1812* (1973) and Jankovics's *Fight* (1977) – both took home the Palme d'Or at Cannes, placing Hungarian animation among the elite.

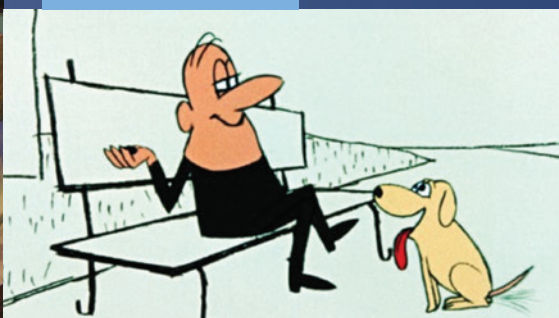
**'Hungarian animation is now experiencing a kind of golden age – with recent awards at top festivals like Ottawa, Cannes and Annecy, where the scene has truly made its mark. And it's not just about short films.'**

Meanwhile, in Pécs, Csaba Varga took a bold step. He gathered a group of amateur filmmakers and, in 1974, founded the IXILON animation studio – later known simply as Varga Studio. IXILON quickly gained a reputation for its edgy graphic style and content geared toward adults, helping to

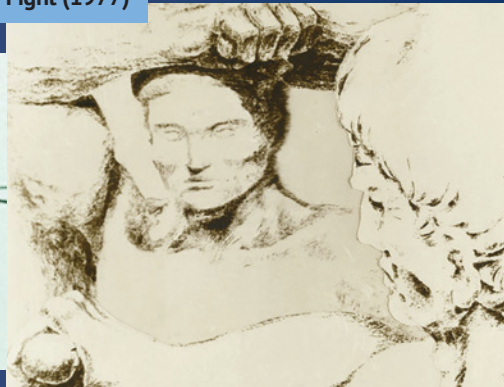
Little Cock's Diamond Halfpenny (1961)



Gustavus (1966-1979)



Fight (1977)



decentralize Hungarian animation and inject it with fresh perspectives.

Among the many talents of this era, few cast a longer shadow than Marcell Jankovics. He debuted with *The Legend of Saint Silvester* in 1964 and moved effortlessly across genres and formats. Whether working on children's programming, avant-garde shorts or lush feature films, Jankovics brought both precision and passion.

### Through a Fly's Eyes

Hungarian animation soared to new heights in the 1980s. Pannonia Film Studio was busier than ever, producing more films, more series and earning more international acclaim. The decade kicked off with a milestone: Ferenc Rófusz's *The Fly* (1980), a short film unlike anything audiences had seen before. Told entirely from the point of view of a fly, it reimaged cinematic perspective in animation and earned Hungary its first Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film. Just months later, Béla Vajda's *Perpetual Motion*, a surreal and darkly comic elevator odyssey, won the Palme D'or at Cannes.

Meanwhile, Marcell Jankovics made the feature *Son of the White Mare* (1981), a hypnotic fusion of Hungarian folklore with Art Deco and Art Nouveau aesthetics. In 1984, it was named one of the 50 greatest animated films ever made by a panel in Los Angeles.

Clay, sand, collage, live action and even computer-aided motion all became tools of the trade. Csaba Varga used clay animation in *The Luncheon* (1980). Ferenc Cakó pioneered sand animation in *Ab Ovo* (1987) and later combined plasticine and coal powder in *Ad Rem* (1989). Gyula Nagy pushed boundaries in *Wave of Fingers* (1986), using – literally – live fingers as animated figures. Meanwhile,

Jánvári's *Labyrinth* (1989) showcased early computer-controlled animation, hinting at what was to come.

By 1988, state support was beginning to dry up, and Hungarian Television pulled back its funding for domestic series. At the same time, Pannonia's monopoly was broken by the founding of Varga Studio – Hungary's first private animation company – led by Csaba Varga and producer András Erkel.

### American Cross-Pollination

One of Varga Studio's first commissions came from Hungarian-born émigré Gábor Csupó, who was then producing a quirky new American show called *The Simpsons*. Until its demise in 2005, Varga Studio would emerge as Hungary's most powerful animation force.

Things quieted down on the Hungarian animation front for a while, especially when it came to festivals, but that all changed with the emergence of a new generation of talent from the renowned animation program at MOME Anim – the animation department at Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest.

MOME Anim has become a hotbed for emerging animation talent, consistently churning out artists whose distinctive, graphically bold designs and surreal, absurdist narratives have made a huge splash on the international stage.

Notable MOME Anim graduates include Réka Bucsi, whose student film *Symphony No. 42* was shortlisted for an Oscar in 2014 and whose follow-up, *Solar Walk*, earned the Grand Prize at the 2018 Ottawa International Animation Festival. Flóra Anna Buda's *27* took home both the Palme d'Or and the Annecy Cristal in 2023. Other notable alumni include Tibor Bánóczki, Tomek Ducki, Luca

Tóth, Nadja Andrasev, Viktória Traub and Balázs Turai, whose *Amok* won the Annecy Cristal for Best Short in 2022.

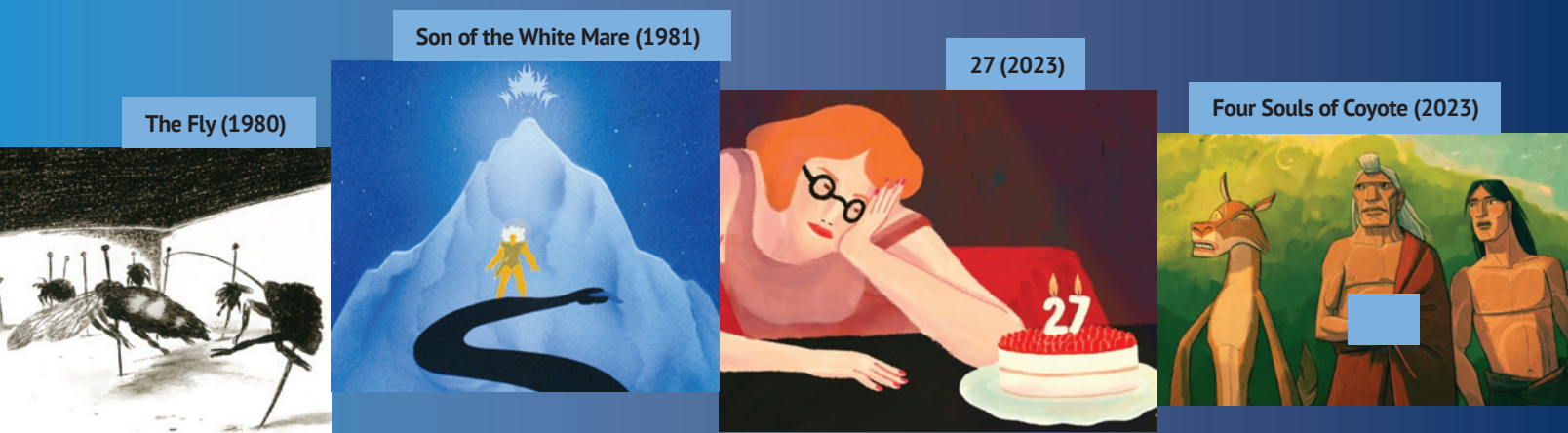
Whether it's the strong teaching foundation, the high caliber of students or, more likely, a combination of both, these recent graduates have revitalized the Hungarian animation scene, leading to some of its most significant international successes. Among the key trends, female animators have come to the forefront, often exploring themes of identity, gender and sexuality in their work.

Hungarian animation is now experiencing a kind of golden age – with recent awards at top festivals like Ottawa, Cannes and Annecy, where the scene has truly made its mark. And it's not just about short films. Recently, there's been a growing body of acclaimed animated features addressing timely political and ecological issues. Notable examples include Áron Gauder's *Four Souls of Coyote*, Tibor Bánóczki and Sarolta Szabó's *White Plastic Sky* and László Csáki's animated documentary *Pelikan Blue*.

This renewed global interest has brought long-overdue recognition to Hungary's storied animation history, while affirming its place on the international stage. What began in the mid-20th century as a niche national industry has now evolved into a bold, boundary-pushing force.

Huge thanks to Anna Ida Orosz for her feedback, corrections and input. ■

**Chris Robinson is the artistic director of the Ottawa International Animation Festival and the author of many books on animation including *Cheer and Loathing: Scattered Rambling on Indie Animation, Dreaming a Way of Life: The Films of Lewis Klahr* and *Raw Outrage: The Films of Phil Mulloy*.**







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EVENTS

ANNECY  
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# MARKET FRESH!

A quick look at some of the hot new animated shows debuting at the Annecy Market (MIFA) in France this month!

## Bernard

**Produced by:** DeAPlaneta Entertainment/Alpha Group Animation

**Created by:** BRB Internacional

**Format:** 104 episodes x 7 minutes

**Type of Animation:** CG

**Target Audience:** Family

**Synopsis:** He's clumsy, impatient, selfish ... and so funny! A curious and comic polar bear who travels around the world learning about us, Bernard can turn something as simple as taking a picture, facing a rainstorm or playing golf into a difficult yet hilarious challenge. Enjoy his adventures and misadventures in this new series.

**Standout Qualities:** One of the biggest and most followed characters on YouTube worldwide is finally back in a new, edgier and longer show. The series will be accompanied by new content available in all media and the release of the movies *Bernard Bear: Mission Mars* and *Agent Bernard: Kingsbear* on many TV and SVOD platforms. Another upcoming feature is also in production (2026 release).

**Exec Quote:** Animation veteran Carlos Biern, the studio's content and media sales director says, "For quite a while now, Bernard's global fans (4.7 million unique monthly viewers on YouTube and 6.7 million subscribers and 1 million followers on Facebook) were asking for new content featuring this amazing character. We can't be happier to be able to start delivering what everyone was asking for, beginning this year."

**Release Date:** Fall 2026

[youtube.com/@BRBplayBernardbear](https://youtube.com/@BRBplayBernardbear)

## Artefact: Thieves of Thieves

**Produced by:** Somewhere Animation/Mediawan Kids & Family

**Directed by:** Stéphane Berry

**Written by:** Cyril Deydier and Stéphane Berry

**Distributed by:** Mediawan Kids & Family

**Format:** 26 x 22 minutes

**Type of Animation:** 2D

**Target Audience:** Kids ages 6-10

**Synopsis:** Jet and Charlie are unassuming teen siblings who become the guardians of powerful objects that were strategically positioned around the globe by ancient civilizations. However, several villains plan on stealing and hoarding these artefacts to pursue their nefarious goals. It's now up to Jet and Charlie to stop them, just like their father before them.

**Standout Qualities:** *Artefacts: Thieves of Thieves* was developed to be the kind of series we'd all love to watch – a true blockbuster shaped by the unique blend of comedy, action and emotion that Stéphane Berry (creator of the global phenomenon *Totally Spies!*) has mastered.

**Exec Quote:** "After years of successful collaboration with Stéphane Berry on the return of *Totally Spies!*, we were eager to imagine a brand-new series for today's kids – one that speaks to their thirst for epic adventures, their curiosity about the world and their timeless love of fun and entertainment," says Arthur Colignon, producer and CEO of Somewhere Animation. "*Artefacts: Thieves of Thieves* is where *Indiana Jones* meets *National Treasure*, with Stéphane Berry's signature comedic twist bringing it all to life."

**Release Date:** Q4, 2026

[mediawankidsandfamily.com](https://mediawankidsandfamily.com)

## Emerald

**Produced by:** Kelebek Media Limited

**Created by:** Deborah Thorpe, based on the *Emerald* books and characters by Harriet Muncaster

**Distributed by:** APC Kids

**Format:** 18 x 11 minutes and 1 x 22 minutes

**Type of Animation:** 2D

**Target Audience:** Kids ages 4-7

**Synopsis:** Emerald's life changes from being a regular mermaid living with her dad and his girlfriend to gaining a princess stepsister and becoming a princess herself when her mother marries the Sea King!

Bernard



Artefact: Thieves of Thieves





Navigating this new world, living between two homes and being part of a blended family is all new to Emerald, but Theodore the Sea Unicorn and Shelly the Sea Turtle are there to help her with the transition and provide plenty of laughs.

**Standout Qualities:** From the world of *Isadora Moon* and the imagination of Harriet Muncaster, the show centers on a mermaid princess who marches to the beat of her own drum. A comedy series for young viewers full of heart, wonder and fun.

**Exec Quote:** "We're so excited to be bringing Emerald the Mermaid Princess to life for Sky Kids in the U.K. Following on the huge success of *Isadora Moon*, it's been a joy and a privilege to produce this wonderful spinoff series, which is landing soon on Sky Kids," says Deborah Thorpe, showrunner and founder of Kelebek Media.

**Release Date:** 2025

[aboutpremiumcontent.com/?programs=emerald](http://aboutpremiumcontent.com/?programs=emerald)

## Submarine Jim

**Produced by:** Xilam Animation

**Created by:** Frédéric Martin

**Format:** 52 x 11 minutes

**Type of Animation:** 2D Animation

**Target Audience:** Kids ages 6-9

**Synopsis:** Delve into the tale of a naive young dolphin named Jim, who is tasked with steering the world's first-ever submarine on wheels. Jim and his friends' water-filled tube has left the ocean to seek out an unlikely destination – the pristine waters of Fishland. As they embark on their mission and navigate plenty of twists, Jim will be torn between his captain responsibilities and fun times with his best friends: Bianca, the daring orca; and the ever-reliable ship steward, Cyril the anchovy.

**Standout Qualities:** *Submarine Jim* is a comedy-adventure about growing up, having fun with your friends and figuring out what it really means to be in charge – even when you're still just a kid at heart.

**Exec Quote:** Marc du Pontavice, founder and CEO at Xilam Animation, says, "We're excited to be working with the highly talented Fred Martin once again. He has a remarkable track record in crafting comedy for global audiences, and we all instantly loved his concept for *Submarine Jim*. It's a pure, laugh-out-loud funny series that builds on our long-standing experience in the comedy space, and we know it will appeal to kids and families all over the world."

**Release Date:** Q2 2026

[xilam.com/en/media/submarine-jim](http://xilam.com/en/media/submarine-jim)

## Winx Club - The Magic Is Back

**Produced by:** Rainbow

**Created by:** Iginio Straffi

**Format:** 26 x 24 minutes

**Type of Animation:** CGI

**Target Audience:** Kids ages 6-8, young adults

**Synopsis:** This rebooted version of the hugely successful *Winx Club* franchise is seen through the eyes of Bloom, a 16-year-old suburban teen who discovers she's a fairy with magical powers. After enrolling in a fairy school in a far-off dimension to learn how to control her magic, Bloom makes new friends while uncovering secrets of her mysterious and exciting past.

**Standout Qualities:** Magical, humorous and relatable, *Winx Club* shows us a world where different personalities and talents make us invincible when united for a common good, and where friendship and teamwork always save the day.

**Exec Quote:** Straffi says, "This bold and colorful new series celebrates a return to the origins of the saga that has captivated millions of fans around the world for over 20 years but has been transformed with innovative and exciting special effects and compelling new storylines."

**Release Date:** 2025

[winxclub.com/en](http://winxclub.com/en)

## Mortina

**Produced by:** Cartobaleno Srl, Treehouse Republic

**Created by:** Barbara Contini, Danny Stack, Alessandro Q. Ferrari

**Distributed by:** Studio 100 International

**Format:** 52 x 12 minutes

**Type of Animation:** 2D/cutout

**Target Audience:** Kids ages 5-8

**Synopsis:** Mortina has just moved into the mysterious Crumbling Manor, her Aunt Departed's house, a large and creaky mansion full of secret passages, ghosts and strange creatures. Mortina adores these odd creatures, especially Nora and Leo, her new friends. Tragedy (the albino greyhound) and Mortina's know-it-all cousin Dilbert also join her on her many adventures.

Emerald



Submarine Jim



Winx Club - The Magic Is Back





**Mortina**



**Tipi T-Rex**

**Standout Qualities:** *Mortina* deals with fear, not of zombies and ghosts but the fear of not being accepted for who we are, and with the desire to please others and ourselves despite our “monstrosities.” It is a story about friendship, diversity and acceptance; picture the quirky charm of *The Addams Family* blended with the warmth and humor of *Vampirina*.

**Exec Quote:** Dorian Bühr head of global distribution at Studio 100 International, says, “Mortina is such a wonderful story about embracing your uniqueness, filled with lots of quirky humor. We are thrilled to be part of this exciting journey of bringing this bestselling book series to screens around the world.”

**Delivery Date:** Nov./Dec. 2025  
**studio100international.com**

## Tipi T-Rex

**Produced by:** Anima Kitchent

**Created by:** Pierre Paris

**Type of Animation:** 2D

**Target Audience:** Preschool (3- to 5-year olds)

**Synopsis:** Follows the daily life of imaginative four-year-old T. rex Tipi (and best friends Pearl and Triceps) who uses her contagious energy and imagination in the most everyday situations to turn them into incredible adventures all while learning and having fun.

**Standout Qualities:** The series combines action-packed adventures with engaging storytelling rooted in everyday situations. Each episode transforms daily life into imaginative journeys that spark

curiosity and wonder. What sets *Tipi T-Rex* apart is its meaningful integration of social-emotional learning, helping children better understand themselves and others while they play and explore.

**Exec Quote:** Miguel Aldasoro, Anima Kitchent’s director of international sales and co-productions says, “Producing 26 new episodes alongside Mocca, our new co-producer, is a great opportunity for the brand. These episodes, currently in production, will bring the total catalog to 52 episodes once completed. This expansion will significantly strengthen the brand’s presence, boosting its appeal for distribution and sales in the market and offering partners a more robust and competitive content package. *Tipi* brings social and emotional learning to life through playful storytelling, helping children build positive habits, [like] playing kindly and respectfully [and] managing emotions, all delivered with a warm mix of humor, empathy and heart.”

**Release Date:** Q4 2026  
**animakitchent.com**

## The Sprite House

**Produced by:** Paper Owl Films

**Created by:** Gráinne McGuinness

**Format:** 52 x 7 mins

**Type of Animation:** 3D and 2D

**Target Audience:** Kids ages 2 to 5

**Synopsis:** When the SpriteLite gang place their bracelet gems on Big Bulb’s story engine, the stories of all the children of all the world sprite to life! They sprite up themselves, glowing up from Humans to SpriteLites! As Big bulb beams them into a tale long ago or far away, they are lit up with inspiration for their own world.

**Standout Qualities:** *The Sprite House* features inclusive storytelling, the natural magic and the light that connects us all, and a positive message about the power of transformation

**Exec Quote:** Gráinne McGuinness, Paper Owl Films’ creative director, tells us, “*The Sprite House* is a super cute, sparkly series bringing the stories of the children of the world to life. Traveling through the magic light beams of the Sprite House, our SpriteLites zoom into far away stories from all over the world. I love this show – the stories of the children of the world are as many as the stars in the sky – it has the potential to run for years and inspire generations! And we get to work on it!”

**paperowlfilms.com** ■



**The Sprite House**





# Tech Reviews

## Wacom's Intuos Pro

I was pleased to discover that Wacom has made substantial updates to Intuos Pro: The drawing size of the tablet (I'm working with a medium-sized one) is roughly the same as the older version, but we've lost the bezels, which means it takes up less real estate on your desk. The tablet is so thin that you aren't going to run into wrist fatigue from having the drawing surface higher than the rest of the desk.

The modifier buttons and express keys have been moved to the top of the tablet, effectively making it ambidextrous without having to go in and switch the orientation. We now have a pair of customizable radial buttons with four buttons each (top, left, right, bottom) and a center button in each that can be used to toggle the functionality of the pair of dials that live beside the buttons. The dials have a mechanical "click" to them, which provides nice physical feedback. I've seen plenty of uses for the dials, like adjusting brush sizes, scrolling in browser windows or zooming in and out. But since I'm an occasional animator, I like to assign the left dial to frame backward and forward, so I can shuttle and check animation as I'm going. All the buttons and dials are customizable per app, but you can also save presets.



The pen is an entirely new design with all kinds of customizability. The grip could be a pencil-like thin version, a cushy straight grip or the traditional flared version. The side buttons can also be changed. If you are a one-button type of person, you can opt for that. Three buttons is the setup I go for. Further, there is a weight inside the pen that can be adjusted for a lighter or heavier weight at the back of the stylus. Or just remove it, if you like a really light feel. There's also a new rubber nib that provides a softer feel than the more traditional style. The pen supports 8,192 levels of pressure, and the tilt sensitivity has been upgraded. Power and connection comes via a USB-C to USB-3 connector, but there is also an internal battery that powers the tablet and Bluetooth connection for wireless use. The mode can be physically switched with a button along the top edge of the tablet. So, if you wanted to get really fancy, you could be physically tethered to the workstation but swap over to Bluetooth and suddenly be working on your laptop.

All of these changes and advances and it's still the same price as the 2017 model.

Website: [wacom.com](http://wacom.com)



Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose recent credits include *I'm a Virgo*, *For All Mankind* and *Black Panther*. He can be reached at [todd@teaspoonvfx.com](mailto:todd@teaspoonvfx.com).

## KeenTools

The KeenTools team has been busy maintaining and making the established tools better, while developing the tool set for the expanded market of Blender users. For those unfamiliar with the product, it is a suite of plugins/add-ons primarily for the purpose of trackerless facial capture. If you have done any kind of tracking, facial or otherwise, you know what a pain this can be — but the task has become ubiquitous in visual effects circles, as we are always doing vanity fixes, de-aging, putting art and designs on faces or replacing pieces with gore or cyborg pieces. It's rigorous and time-consuming, and KeenTools makes it immeasurably easier. GeoTracker is also in the suite, which is tailored for tracking more rigid-body stuff, but the face stuff is where the gold lies.

The foundation of the technology is based on the idea that you're using a face that has the proper topology to begin with. You take that geo, and by using control points, you can adjust the structure of the head to your move from different angles of the head. Once you have the right shape, FaceTracker can go through your shot and track the head — along with changing expressions and lip sync. If it starts to derail, you can go in and



tweak and refine. Since the geo and UVs are the same across all heads, you can quickly add textures, paint out blemishes or even swap faces without as much hassle. Also, because the topology is the same, it means you can blend between the original tracked head and a totally different head. So, if you are all about sculpting in ZBrush and want to track one of your humanoid creations onto an actor — you can wrap the KeenTools head around your creature to inherit the form but retain the KeenTools topo — you can have an animated head! Basically, using the tracking data facial mocap to drive your creature.

It is, and always has been, a powerful tool for both 2D and 3D face-tracking solutions. It's fast, efficient and totally worth it. If you are a studio, the FaceBuilder/Tracker bundle is \$749, but if you are freelancer, it's \$269 (both as an annual subscription). You can use the license in both Nuke and Blender. One face-tracking shot will pay itself off.

Website: [keentools.io](http://keentools.io)

Software reviews were written after being tested on a Puget Workstation AMD Ryzen Threadripper PRO 7975WX 4.0GHz 32 Core 350W: 128GB DDR5-5600 RAM and NVIDIA RTX 6000 Ada Ge 48GB PCI-E. ([pugetsystems.com](http://pugetsystems.com))

# Bring Cinematic Effects to Your Next Animatic or Board Pitch

## *Toon Boom Reveals Storyboard Pro 25 and Harmony 25 at Annecy.*

Since 1994, Toon Boom Animation has developed software and services designed with professional artists and studios in mind. This Montreal-based company was an early leader in digital ink & paint software and throughout the years has expanded its scope across the production pipeline. Toon Boom Animation's industry-leading product lineup now includes **Harmony, Storyboard Pro, Producer and Jump**, alongside training and consulting services to support productions of all sizes.

Storyboard Pro is the only professional-grade solution designed from the ground up for storyboard artists. Whether you are thumbnailing your first pass, refining the visual storytelling on your project, pitching your boards or timing out camera moves in an animatic, Storyboard Pro is built to support an artist's (and studio's) creative work throughout the preproduction process.

### Introducing Storyboard Pro 25

Toon Boom has added powerful new tools to support every step of the storyboarding process. The new Quick Thumbnailing Workflow helps artists focus on their first pass through their scenes. While touching up their boards, artists can now draw with



For the Quick Thumbnailing Workflow, artists will be able to draw their thumbnails in a brand interface — or print out a grid for thumbnailing on paper, which can be scanned back into Storyboard Pro panels. Either method allows artists to focus on the first pass of their boards with fewer distractions.

Non-Destructive Layer Effects allow artists to add cinematic effects like blurs, contrast adjustments, and blending modes to their panels, while retaining the flexibility to adjust or redraw elements in a scene. These effects can all be keyframed and animated within Storyboard Pro, making them useful for both board pitches and animatics.

The most significant quality-of-life change in Storyboard Pro 25 might also be its smallest. Artists can expect to see significantly reduced scene load times and file transfers with smaller project files.

This was made possible by both optimizing the structure of and compressing complex project files. Additionally, both Storyboard Pro and Harmony 25 have an option to save a project as a single file, which is ideal for collaborating remotely with artists and studios.

Toon Boom Ember is available for Storyboard Pro 25 and Harmony 25 as

an optional addition. Ember is a suite of AI-powered tools designed to enhance creative workflows in Storyboard Pro and Harmony so artists can work with fewer interruptions, iterate faster, and focus on the creative process.

Storyboard Pro was designed from the ground up to support the craft of storyboarding, meaning that it doesn't require third-party plugins or workarounds to support a storyboard department's workflow. Unlike other tools, storyboarding is not Storyboard Pro's side-project. It is the entire reason why the application exists.

The initial group of artists testing Storyboard Pro 25 have been most excited to see support for drawing thumbs on paper, which significantly helped them focus on the first pass of their boards. This is not the first time Toon Boom Animation has supported traditional paper workflows. From the earliest versions of Harmony, traditional animators could scan their pencil drawings for digital ink & paint. (That feature has been maintained and is still available in the latest release.)



**Quick Thumbnailing Workflow in Storyboard Pro 25.** Board samples were inspired by Dullsville and the Doodleverse created by Doodles and Golden Wolf.

the same painterly ABR brushes used in their concept art. When artists need to truly wow their clients with an animatic or board pitch, the latest version adds an Effect Stack View for easily applying and animating non-destructive cinematic effects.

The two most dramatic new features are the Quick Thumbnailing Workflow and the Non-Destructive Layer Effects.

**Both Storyboard Pro 25 and Harmony 25 will be released alongside the full launch of Toon Boom Ember at this year's Annecy International Animation Film Festival. Storyboard Pro 25 is available as a free update to artists on annual or monthly licenses.**

**Visit [toonboom.com](https://toonboom.com) for pricing as well as discounted student licenses.**



# STORYBOARD<sup>25</sup> PRO

**New**

**Quick Thumbnailing Workflow**

**Enhanced Effect Stack View**

**Non-Destructive Layer Effects**

**Optional Add-On:**

**Now with Toon Boom Ember**

Download a 21 day trial at  
[toonboom.com/storyboard-pro](https://toonboom.com/storyboard-pro)



Artwork by Carlos Araya

# HARMONY<sup>25</sup>

**New**

**Breakdown Pose Assistant**

**Pencil Line Retouch Tool**

**Import Photoshop Brushes**

**Optional Add-On:**

**Now with Toon Boom Ember**

Download a 21 day trial at  
[toonboom.com/harmony](https://toonboom.com/harmony)



Artwork by Carlos Araya



# The Rebellion Will Be Televised!

VFX supervisor Mohen Leo discusses how he and his team orchestrated a rebellion on a galactic scale for *Andor's* second season.

By Trevor Hogg

**W**hen *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* was released in 2016, it proved so popular that a prequel series called *Andor* was created by Tony Gilroy and premiered on Disney+ in 2022. Whereas Season 1 focused on what led Cassian Andor (portrayed by Diego Luna) to join the rebellion against the Galactic Empire, the second season covers a period of four years in which Andor was a key resistance fighter. The last episode takes viewers to the beginning of *Rogue One*.

"You can basically imagine that with every three episodes you're moving one year closer to *Rogue One*, so by the time you're in the final ones, you do make those connections directly," says Mohen Leo, the show's VFX supervisor. "The reason why we didn't leverage all that much from Season One is that it's almost all new locations, ships and planets. We were lucky that almost all the people from the first season continued straight on to Season Two, which meant that there was this instant shorthand and trust with Tony Gilroy [and each other] that allowed us to be more ambitious."

## Return of a Popular Droid

Something fans of *Rogue One* will be enjoy seeing is how Cassian Andor goes about reprogramming an Imperial security droid

that will later become his trusted sidekick. "I worked on *Rogue One* as well," says Leo. "One of the great things to see was, even with the big gap in real-world time, the moment you saw Alan Tudyk and Diego Luna together, that chemistry we had in *Rogue One* between Cassian Andor and K-2SO was immediately there again. Then our job was making sure that every nuance of Alan's performance came through."

Also returning from Season One is a

ground-mech salvage assistant unit. "B2EMO is also back," says Leo. "In Season One, he was entirely [made using] practical creature effects, and it's the same thing in Season Two. We did not have to do anything. The creature department did such a wonderful job of that performance."

Viewers also get to see a mix of this world's new and familiar creatures. "As usual, there is a good spread of various interesting alien species, and if you watch closely, you'll see that some are direct callbacks to *Rogue One*," he says.

Coruscant, which serves as the capital of the Republic once again, is filled with political intrigue as Mon Mothma secretly seeks funds to finance the rebellion. "One of my favorite parts of working with the show for both seasons was Coruscant, because it allowed you to continue to flesh out that world," says Leo. "The prequels did a nice job of showing Coruscant of the rich and powerful, Jedi Temples and opera houses. Some of the animated shows and TV shows go into the criminal underbelly. But what *Andor* allowed us to do is show you the Coruscant of ordinary people, where you can believe that people could ride public transport and go to work and shopping. What worked well is the use of real city locations, both in London and, this time around, we were also shooting in Spain



**"What *Andor* allowed us to do is show you the Coruscant of ordinary people where you can believe that people could ride public transport and go to work and shopping ... We managed to make that planet city feel like a bigger place."**

ANDOR VFX SUPERVISOR MOHEN LEO





**Building Distant Worlds:** The second season of *Andor* will focus on the growing pains of the Rebel Alliance and will feature stunning visuals set in the world of Coruscant and the customary mix of cool droids, battleships and fantastic creatures.

specific storytelling devices.”

Pivotal to the storytelling is the construction of the Death Star. “In *Rogue One*, you literally see the moment when the laser dish was placed into the Death Star,” recalls Leo. “Here, we are a little bit earlier than that, so it has to be almost there but not quite, so you can work backwards from that. We had the

Death Star extensively in *Rogue One*, and that was the main basis of the work.”

The bigger ambitions of Season Two had to be realized within the same production schedule as Season One. “Having known Tony now for so many years, the aesthetics of it was clear, and often he would give us a lot of freedom and go, ‘Come up with something, show it to us, and I’ll comment on it,’” says Leo. “Initially, going into Season Two we were more nervous about the scope because it is much bigger than Season One, but the

for some beautiful exterior city locations stuff; that was the basis for showing many different facets of Coruscant. I enjoyed that. We managed to make that planet city feel like a bigger place because you see more different aspects of it.”

The grain planet of Mina-Rau is among the new backdrops for one of the big action sequences. “That was a crazy thing for me,” says Leo with a laugh. “I had never done anything like that before. The production specifically had a farm in Oxford plant a giant field of rye six months in advance so that it would grow to the right height. It was several football fields’ worth of grain. Within that we could shoot so much practically and have visual effects extend outwards and put in some bigger structures in. But again, having that basis of being in a massive field of grain and everything around the actors is real makes a huge difference.”

He adds, “Special effects, for example, did do some of the cool dirt explosions, but because it was all rye, they couldn’t do any fire because that would light the hold thing on fire! That was one of the things where from the start we were going, ‘Do what you can with smoke and dirt. We’re going to add the fire to that.’”

Echoing a *James Bond* cold opening scene of a mission in progress, *Andor* attempts to steal a prototype TIE fighter, which sets Season Two in motion. “There is a new ship in Episode 201 that is established as a ‘skunk works’ test pilot prototype,” explains Leo. “That was a fun cooperation with [production designer] Luke Hull and the art department because it hadn’t been seen before. We were able to jam a bunch of different ideas of various weapons

and sensor systems in there.”

The art department built a full-size version of the fighter that was on set. “That was fantastic,” says Leo. “I got to sit in it! Whenever you see it static or not moving, it’s the real thing. That was great because people could get in and out, and Cassian had the controls. We shot all of that in camera. But once the TIE fighter takes off, it’s a mix in the wider shots of still shooting in the hangar but with a CG ship flying around and shooting.”

To create over 4,000 visual effects for the season’s 12 episodes, most vendors from Season One were brought back. “In order to reduce the co-dependencies between vendors, we try to find chunks of work that often relate to a particular environment,” explains Leo. “In the first three episodes, there is this grain planet. Also in the first three episodes, you see Mon Mothma’s home planet of Chandrila, which has landscapes based on Montserrat in Spain. We went to shoot there as well. We have some beautiful landscape photography. Those were Scanline VFX’s main body of work. There are always little things like when you have a ship that shows up on one planet shows up on the other planet then people share that. Hybride focused more on a planet that plays in later episodes. ILM was all over a lot of the things, but the big focus was on the Coruscant.”

### Constructing the Star

Other contributions came from Soho VFX, Midas VFX and Blind. “For the UI graphics we’re working with Blind, which did *Rogue One* as well. Often, the UI [graphics] are beautiful window dressing, but in some cases, they’re



shooting and prep schedules weren’t any longer. We were like, ‘We have to do that much more in the same time.’ But again, having just that trust and familiarity with the key people made that possible and allowed us to work out how to do most of the things that Tony wanted to achieve.” ■

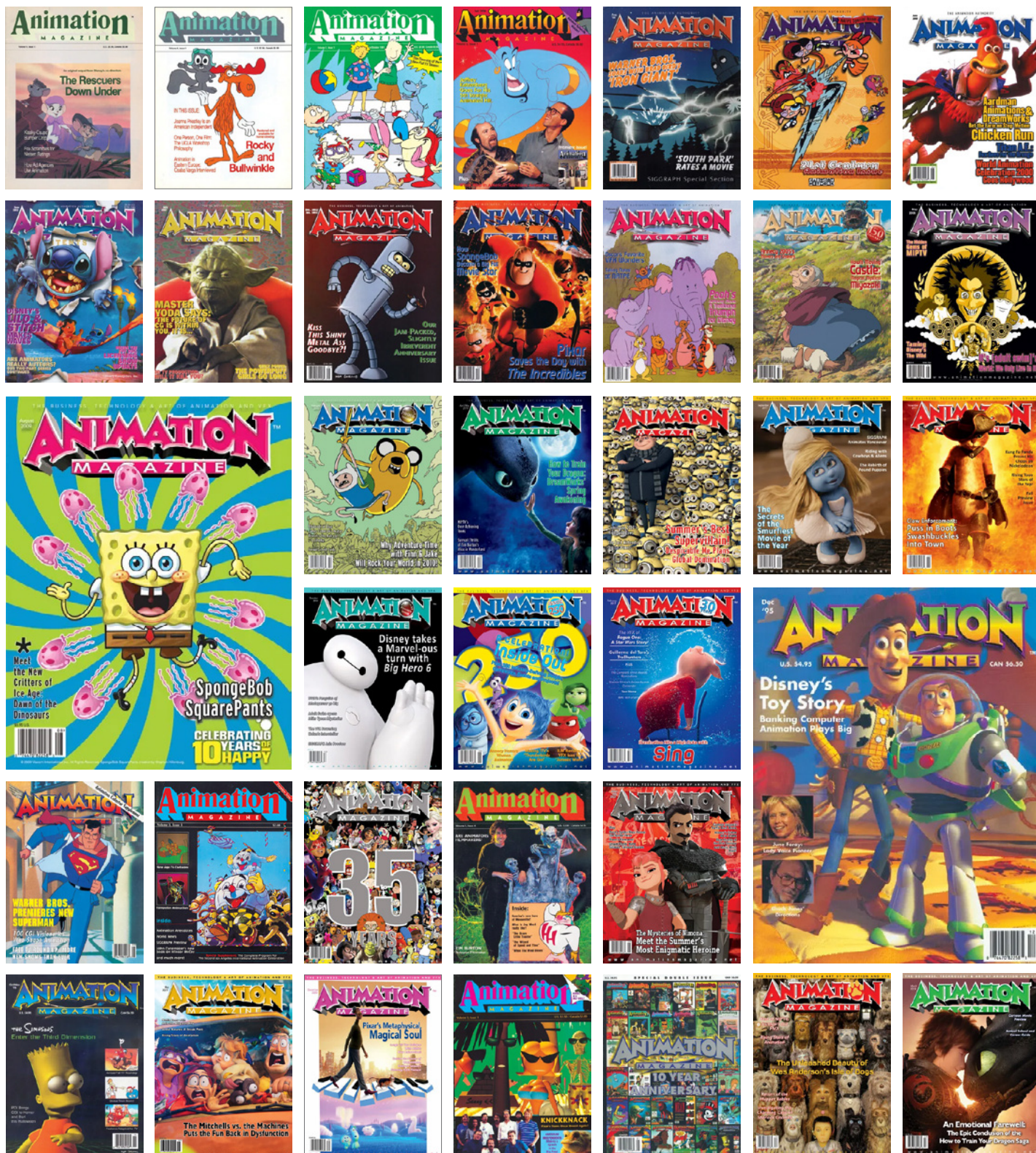
**The second season of *Andor* premiered on Disney+ in April.**





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# IT WAS 30 YEARS AGO!

Step inside our time machine and check out all the cool animated highlights of 1995!



**Feb 13:** Chuck Jones receives a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.



**March 5:** *The Simpsons* and *The Critic* cross-over episode "A Star Is Burns" premieres on Fox. (featuring guest voices Jon Lovitz and Maurice LaMarche).



**March 27:** *Bob's Birthday*, directed by Alison Snowden and David Fine (produced by the National Film Board of Canada) wins the Oscar for Best Animated Short.



**April 7:** Directed by Kevin Lima, Disney's cult classic *A Goofy Movie* arrives in U.S. theaters.



**April 12:** Don Bluth Limited studio's ill-fated last film *The Pebble and the Penguin* is released by MGM/UA.



**May 28:** The first episode of *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist* premieres on Comedy Central.

**June 23:** Disney's 33rd feature *Pocahontas*, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, lands in U.S. theaters. The film wins the Oscar for Best Song ("Colors of the Wind") and Score (Alan Menken & Stephen Schwartz) the following year.



**July 15:** Yoshifumi Kondo and Hayao Miyazaki's *Whisper of the Heart* open in theaters in Japan.





**Sept. 9:** Kids WB! premieres a quartet of new animated shows — *Freakazoid!*, *Pinky and the Brain*, *The Sylvester and Tweety Mysteries* and *Earthworm Jim*.

**Sept. 16:** Film Roman's *The Twisted Tales of Felix the Cat* (the second series based on Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan's famous feline) debuts on CBS.



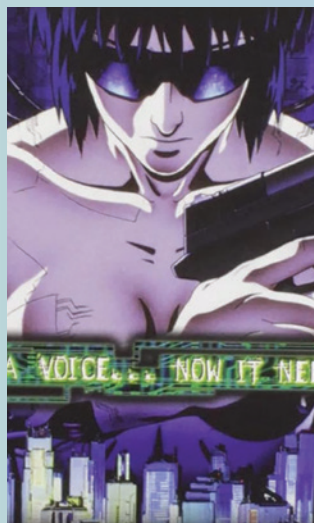
**Sept. 25:** Two of *The Lion King*'s popular stars *Timon & Pumbaa* get their own show on CBS and syndication (exec produced by **Bobs Gannaway** and **Tony Craig**).



**Oct. 4:** The first episode of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* premieres on TV Tokyo. Produced by Gainax and animated by Tatsunoko, the influential mecha anime is directed by **Hideaki Anno**.



**Oct. 22:** Cinar's *The Little Lulu Show* begins its run on HBO Family and CTV.



**Nov. 18:** Directed by **Mamoru Oshii**, the cult classic *Ghost in the Shell* zooms into theaters.



**Nov. 22:** The first CG-animated feature, Pixar's *Toy Story* is released in theaters.

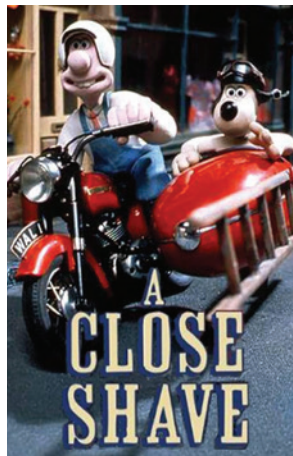


**Dec. 1:** **Trey Parker** and **Matt Stone** introduce early versions of their *South Park* characters in their animated short *Jesus vs. Santa* (a.k.a. *The Spirit of Christmas*).

animationmagazine.net



**Dec. 22:** Directed by **Simon Wells**, Amblimation's final feature *Balto* opens in theaters.



**Dec. 24:** **Wallace and Gromit**'s Oscar-winning *A Close Shave* is released. Directed by **Nick Park**, the stop-motion Aardman classic is the characters' third short.



**Dec. 28:** UPA's acclaimed 1950 short *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (directed by **Robert Cannon** and **John Hubley**) is added to the National Film Registry.



# AFTER ANNECY, DON'T MISS THE OTHER BIG ANIMATION EVENT OF THE YEAR!



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# A Cure for Unbearable Solitude



**How animation veteran Aaron Blaise returned to the world of 2D toons with his beautifully crafted short *Snow Bear*.**

**A**n isolated polar bear finds ways to overcome his solitude in veteran animator Aaron Blaise's lovely new 2D-animated short. Titled *Snow Bear*, the lovingly crafted work is one of the acclaimed projects competing at Annecy in the Young Audiences category this month. Blaise, a much-respected Disney animator who worked on a wide range of classics (including *The Rescuers Down Under*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*) and co-directed *Brother Bear*, and the short's producer, Nick Burch, recently spoke to *Animation Magazine* about their labor of love.

"I had always wanted to do my own animated film, and when I left Disney in 2010, I signed up with Digital Domain to direct a movie called *The Legend of Tembo*," recalls Blaise. "I worked on that movie for

a couple of years, but then the studio went bankrupt. I didn't want to go to the studio world and work for executives anymore, so I decided to create an online art education hub ([creatureartteacher.com](http://creatureartteacher.com)). My partner Nick and I grew the business over the past 13 years, and it was based on creating tutorials and courses that people can download on various subjects, including animation art. At some point, we thought it would be a really great idea to have a course on creating your own animated short. That gave me the opportunity to go off and paint, draw and animate things that I wanted to, and turn it all into a lesson."

## **Drawn from the Heart**

Blaise decided to zero in on ideas that were close to his heart. "I have had some personal things happen in my life over the

years," he says. "I lost my wife to cancer about 18 years ago. We were together for 20 years, and I went through a very difficult time. So, in a way, *Snow Bear* is a metaphor for the loneliness that I experienced and letting someone go as you realize there's nothing you can do. The idea for the short came to me one morning as I was taking a shower — that's where I get all of my creative ideas! So, I pitched it to Nick the next day, and he liked it. That was almost nine years ago!"

"Aaron and I were pretty adamant about approaching the short in the same way we'd tackle a feature project at Disney," says Burch. "So, we set production quotas, tracked the time and had story meetings, even though we were working on an 11-minute short. It kept us on task, but it also helped us work on the project based on a structure that



could become a road map for a course on how to create your own short."

Blaise says he was able to build awareness of the project by using his social media presence and sharing his progress on his website. "We wanted to build an audience for it because we know that we don't have the reach of a Disney or DreamWorks or Pixar, so we wanted to spread awareness of it by sharing material right from the beginning. We would share our progress with our website members doing livestreams on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'd just turn my camera on, and people could just tune in and watch me work on the backgrounds or do some character animation or effects. We ended up recording 400 hours of the process. It did build an audience, and we got a nice bit of anticipation from people out there who wanted to see it."

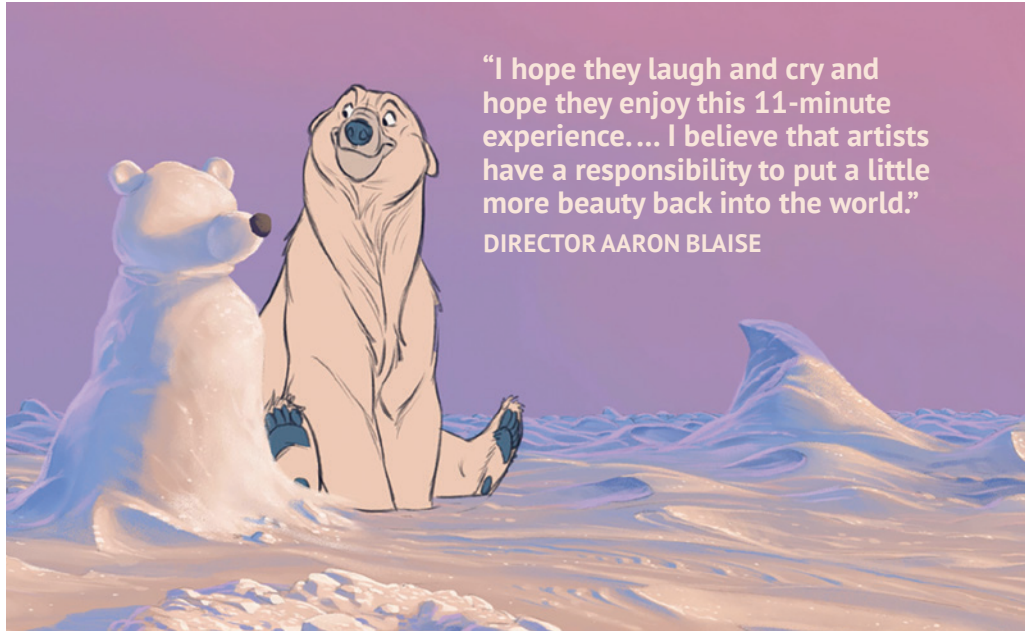
A huge advocate of 2D animation, Blaise says his go-to tool of choice for this project was TVPaint. "I had just finished a commercial for John Lewis department store in 2013, and I did it all on paper," Blaise recalls. "Some of the other guys who worked on it were animating digitally, and I was really intrigued by it. One of my friends, Dom Carola, who owns Premise Entertainment, told me, 'I know you, and I know your likes and dislikes, and I think you are really going to like working on TVPaint.' So I downloaded it, and I've never ever used anything else besides it! Once I understood the interface, it just felt like I was at my desk and working with paper. Of course, from a production standpoint, it's much more efficient. And that's what I used for the short!"

One of the toughest parts of producing *Snow Bear* was coming up with the perfect ending for the ursine hero. "We redid that ending in board format several different times, because it was really hard to get the right emotional punch," says Burch. "From a story standpoint, you don't want to hit people over the head with the message. Aaron was a genius at this. He'd say, 'Let's take a shot out here,' or 'Let's add a shot here' or 'let's trim a few seconds,' and he really took time with the boards a lot."

Blaise says it always takes a lot of work to get to the best and simplest ending. "One of the things we did was to make sure we showed the short to friends that we trusted," says the director. "We wanted



to get that irony of the bear drifting into a foreign land and coming across another lonely bear in the same situation. We did it a couple of times where that wasn't very clear.



**The Bear Necessities:** After years of thinking about the concept, Disney animation veteran Aaron Blaise brings his lovingly made 2D short *Snow Bear* to festival audiences around the world.

films or paint pictures is not just because of the end product. That's a bonus, but I do it because I love the process. I love sitting down with an idea in my head and working out the problems and drawing. That's why I do hand-drawn animation, because I love to draw and I enjoy going into my little zone. So, yes, I think AI is going to come into our industry and it will impact jobs to a certain degree, especially in the big studios. It's up to independent filmmakers like Nick and myself to do what we want to do. As Nick says, we are really going to push the idea

"I hope they laugh and cry and hope they enjoy this 11-minute experience.... I believe that artists have a responsibility to put a little more beauty back into the world."

DIRECTOR AARON BLAISE

We didn't start out with an environmental message, but that just emerged because the ice around the bear was melting. So, we also wanted that to work right, [which] was also a challenge."

### Living with AI

When asked about AI and animation, the filmmaker says he believes that the technology isn't going away. "Obviously, it's going to affect every aspect of our life, not just the animation industry," he says. "So, the question is, how do we adapt to it and how do we make it ethical, etc.? I do think that eventually AI will be able to make films in some form or another. But the reason I make

of doing artisanal, handcrafted films."

For now, as *Snow Bear* is making its way through festivals like Tribeca and Annecy, the filmmakers are hoping it will move audiences with its simple message. "I hope they laugh and cry and hope they enjoy this 11-minute experience and walk away with a little more beauty in their hearts," concludes Blaise. "I try to say this at the end of every streaming session and video that I do. I believe that artists have a responsibility to put a little more beauty back into the world." ■

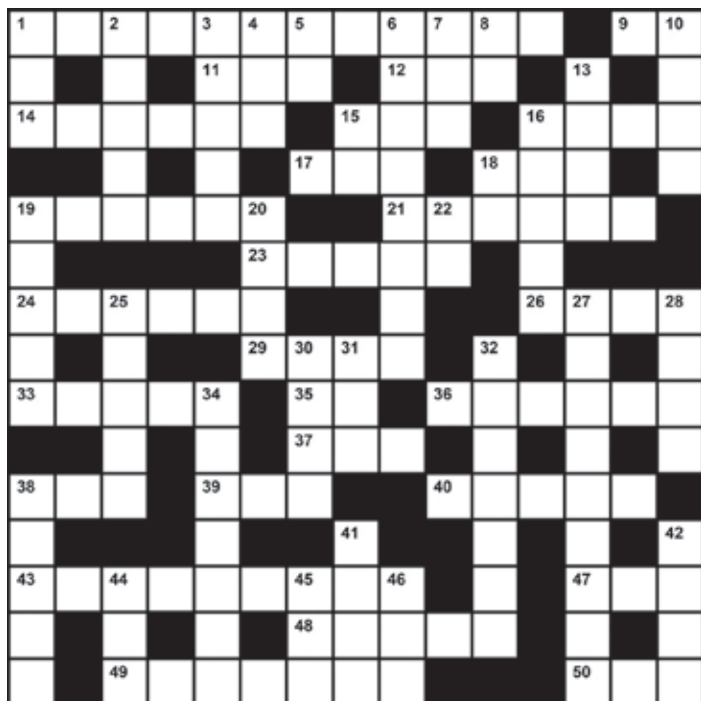
***Snow Bear* is part of Young Audiences competition at Annecy. You can find out more at [creatureartteacher.com](http://creatureartteacher.com).**



# 350th Issue Crossword Puzzle

By Myles Mellor

What would a big milestone issue be without a specially themed crossword created by the amazing Myles Mellor? We asked our favorite puzzle-master to create a nostalgic crossword looking back at 350 issues worth of animation favorites, and he certainly didn't let us down. Enjoy!



## ACROSS

- 1 Action figures in a 1987 TV series: they were named after Renaissance men, 2 words
- 9 Marketing piece
- 11 Cheeky back-talk
- 12 Painting medium in Loving Vincent- about the life of Van Gogh
- 14 Animated film from 2000, The Emperor's New \_\_\_\_
- 15 Blue \_\_\_\_ Samurai, where Maya Erskine voices Mizu
- 16 Animated movie about an eagle, Gold \_\_\_\_
- 17 Living quarters, briefly
- 18 Historical time period
- 19 Pop icon who played Glinda in Wicked, first name
- 21 Japanese animated fantasy film from 1988, My Neighbor \_\_\_\_
- 23 Test episode of TV series
- 24 In 1987 Mattel released two animated specials featuring this doll
- 26 The villain in the 1994 animated musical, The Lion King
- 29 Put in stitches
- 33 2024 animated science fiction movie, The Wild \_\_\_\_
- 35 Old vinyl record, abbr.
- 36 Mad God's genre
- 37 Channel owned by Disney
- 38 Singer Morrison
- 39 Animated TV series that was first aired in 1987, \_\_\_\_ on Melmac
- 40 The gun-for-hire in the 1987 Japanese anime series, Ryo \_\_\_\_
- 43 Animated TV show centered around Huey, Dewey and Louie, 2 words
- 47 Broadcast
- 48 Love intensely
- 49 British animated series that premiered in 1987 about a heroic kid who puts out fires, goes with 50 across
- 50 See 49 across

## DOWN

- 1 Henpeck
- 2 King Kong actress, Watts
- 3 Character in the 1987 animated movie released in 1987, The Chipmunk Adventure
- 4 Deadlock result
- 5 Carl Fredrickson's story
- 6 First entirely computer animated feature film made in 1995, 2 words
- 7 Untruth
- 8 Urban train system
- 10 N.C. University
- 13 Yogi \_\_\_\_, the first breakout character in animated television
- 15 Dorothy's aunt
- 16 Facial features above eyes
- 18 Alien who was too good for earth
- 19 Yellowish-brown
- 20 Gorillas and chimps
- 22 Overtime, abbr.
- 25 He played the genie in Aladdin, \_\_\_\_ Williams
- 27 The \_\_\_\_ Adventures in Wonderland, animated musical family film from 1987
- 28 Exceptional
- 30 Page (through)
- 31 Police alert message, abbr.
- 32 The genre of the 2009 animated movie, The Princess and the Frog
- 34 The Brave Little \_\_\_\_ 1987 animated musical fantasy film
- 38 One of the most memorable animated villains from the 1987 film, The Empire Strikes Back
- 41 Sacred Hindu writings
- 42 Neat and orderly
- 44 Half-\_\_\_\_ (coffee order)
- 45 Hasty escape
- 46 Prince, to a king



**Myles Mellor** is one of the top crossword writers in the world who's published in over 1,000 magazines, newspapers and web outlets – with over 20,000 crosswords published worldwide. He supplies theme crosswords, diamond crosswords, syndicated puzzles, cryptograms, diagramless crosswords, word search, sudokus, anagrams and word games (themedcrosswords.com). You can subscribe to Myles' crosswords at [ilovecrosswords.com](http://ilovecrosswords.com).





# A DAY IN THE LIFE

To take the sting out of **Big Mouth** delivering its final season on Netflix this month, **Jennifer Flackett** and **Andrew Goldberg**, the co-creators of the long-running toon shared a typical day in their creative lives with us. We'll miss the wonderful hormonal gang terribly, but we'll cherish their memories in our hearts forever!



Animatic Screening: We always like to screen our animatics with the crew to get a sense of what's working and what needs help. Looks like this was a good



Time to give notes to a writer. We like to begin with personal insults.



Brainstorming: Here's Jen, hard at work on *The New York Times* Spelling Bee!



We find there's no better way to win the hearts and minds of your staff than dancing awesomely.



Oooh, office birthdays! Everyone loves to get sung at.



Recording with **Jack McBrayer**: We told Jack we'd kill his family if he didn't smile.



Zoom voice over records with **Nick Kroll** and **John Mulaney**.



What could possibly be more fun than recording with Nick Kroll and John Mulaney? Recording with **Ayo Edebiri**.

10th Anniversary

# ANIMATION TOKYO

Tokyo is a thriving hub of animation production, yet much of its creative output is to be discovered by the global market. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government is committed to bridging this gap by supporting the global expansion of our exceptionally innovative animation studios and creators. Since 2016, our presence at MIFA has been a key part of this mission.

This year, we are also proud to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Tokyo's exhibition at MIFA. To mark this special occasion, we will be hosting a 10th-anniversary event and distributing commemorative souvenirs at the MIFA venue. We look forward to welcoming you.

**Welcome to our Booth (C.31) at MIFA2025!**  
**(From 6/10 ▶ 6/13) in Annecy, France**

Let's discover  
Tokyo talents at  
**Partners Pitches**

June 10th (Tue)  
5:15p.m. ▶ 6:30p.m.

at Haendel (Imperial Palace)

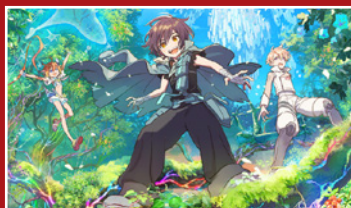
Animation Tokyo 10th Anniversary  
Networking Party following  
**Partners Pitches**

June 10th (Tue)  
6:30p.m. ▶ 8:00p.m.

at Ravel (Imperial Palace)

**Tokyo Anime Pitch Grand Prix winners (2021, 2022, 2023)  
come back to MIFA!**

In addition to 2024(FY) Tokyo Anime Pitch Grand Prix winners, 4 studios below from the winners of 2021, 2022, 2023 will also be in Tokyo Metropolitan Government Booth(C.31) and welcome you! Please don't miss their works as well.





# 2024(FY) Tokyo Anime Pitch Grand Prix winners



## Cryptid Chaos



Atsuhito Seki

<https://atsuhito-works.format.com/>



## Kitten head

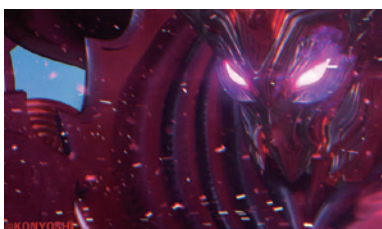


S.o.K LLC

<https://sok-llc.com/>

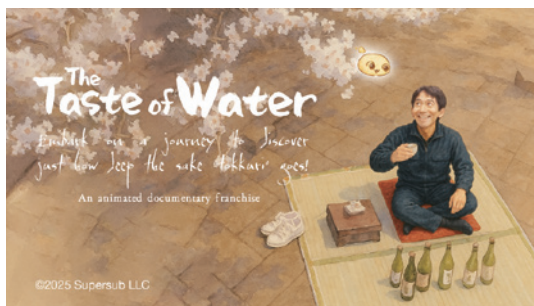


## REKKA



Konyoshi Co., Ltd.

<https://www.kon-yoshi.co.jp/>



## The Taste of Water

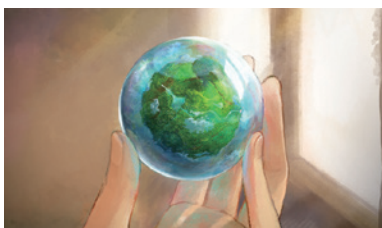


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## Tao



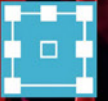
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# THE MASTER AND MARGARITA



Alexander Golberg Jero



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**A New Animated Adaptation of the Acclaimed Novel**

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